

# Crazy Heart and unnecessarily narrow pictures

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*Written and directed by Scott Cooper, from the novel by Thomas Cobb*

In *Crazy Heart*, Otis “Bad” Blake (Jeff Bridges) is a world-weary country singer still on the road, appearing at venues beneath his former stature (a bowling alley, a local bar) in front of small but loyal—often nostalgic—crowds. He drinks far too much, he badly needs money, and he smarts from the great commercial success of his protégé and one-time sideman, Tommy Sweet (Colin Farrell). Very much alone at 57, Blake has been married four times and has a grown son he hasn’t seen since the latter was a small boy.

In Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the course of his touring (this is presumably the late 1980s), the performer meets Jean Craddock (Maggie Gyllenhaal), a young single mother with a son, who writes about music for the local newspaper. Despite the more than a quarter-century difference in their ages, the two fall for each other. One day and night together turn into more.

Meanwhile, Sweet and Blake’s agent urges him to write new material. An offer arrives promising a large amount of cash if he can come up with an album of songs. Blake invites Jean and her son to visit him at his house in Houston for a few days. At first, things go well, but his bad habits and clouded brain get him into trouble. Will Jean offer him another chance? Does the music business still have room for him? Can he overcome his incapacitating alcoholism?

Writer-director Scott Cooper, who based himself on a 1987 novel by Thomas Cobb, was raised in southwest Virginia. He told an interviewer about his feelings for bluegrass and country music, “I grew up on Bill Monroe and Ralph Stanley and Doc Watson. As I got older I was drawn to Merle [Haggard] and Johnny Cash

and Waylon Jennings, because they wrote about their complicated lives and put them into song.” The character seems to owe a good deal as well to veteran singer-actor Kris Kristofferson.

Cooper also commented on the importance of his collaboration with Bridges, Gyllenhaal and Robert Duvall (who plays an old bar-owner friend of Blake’s and also co-produced the film), none of whom made a great deal of money on the movie: “Everyone was doing it for the right reasons.... It was a real labor of love. In this climate that is what actors have to do. Studios are not making these types of films.” (*Film Independent*)

This is a decent film, honestly and sensitively performed. The music is effective, appropriate, and occasionally moving (with original material written by T-Bone Burnett and the late Stephen Bruton). Bridges is fine and convincing. It is good to see the talented actor, someone who possesses a genuine social conscience, receiving attention and accolades. Farrell, as is his wont when he’s not pretending to be an action star in big, stupid films, is appealing. Maggie Gyllenhaal, in a somewhat predictable role, is better. She has a way of looming expressively toward the camera, and receding, with her face and body, that suggests more real emotion and depth than her lines contain.

Cooper’s comment about the “types of films” favored by studio executives is no doubt true. Movies having anything to do with life are bound to be more complex, more difficult for conglomerates to market, likely to offend someone, and so forth. Hence we see on the screens what we see.

Having said all that, it would be a mistake to overvalue *Crazy Heart*. More or less quiet and intelligent films stand out today because the general

fare is so poor. Cooper's film does not break new ground (see Bruce Beresford's *Tender Mercies*, 1983, with Duvall, and other films about country music). It has a tendency to be formulaic. Gyllenhaal's Jean in the script, as noted above, is not much more than an adjunct—the performer herself largely makes something out of it.

The crisis involving Blake and her son is sufficiently predictable that the spectator hopes the film will defy expectations and take another direction. In any event, Jean's immediate response to Blake's failings seems legitimate, but, in the long run, I found her rather harsh and moralizing. The film as a whole turns in that direction, as its last section becomes something of an anti-drinking, "personal responsibility" campaign. Scenes of Blake vomiting and passing out are forcefully done, but why do they receive such prominence? The close attention paid to such moments suggests they sum up the singer's life and problems in some fashion, but that seems a bit facile.

One doesn't have to be an admirer of Blake's "bad side" and its harmful consequences to wish that something more complicated and compassionate might be made of his difficulties. If the character, as claimed, reproduces or combines elements of many performers' lives (and not only country music singers, by any means!), we are clearly dealing with something more than individual moral delinquency.

What is it that has caused so many popular music performers in the US so much despair, disappointment, neglect, and often, early death? *Crazy Heart* works against cliché in making Tommy Sweet, as it turns out, a decent and caring individual, but that tends to sidestep the larger question. What *is it then* that has apparently made a considerable portion of Blake's life such a vale of tears? Is he merely his own worst enemy?

In his *Lost Highway*, critic Peter Guralnick notes that what struck him "most forcibly" about the various country and blues musicians discussed in the book "was not so much the vicissitudes of their lives...as the way in which the pursuit of success seriously, inevitably distorted the very core of their being, as well as the music itself."

Cooper's drama abstains on this issue, seeming to imply at least that Blake's personal traumas have had little or nothing to do with his background, the sources

and driving forces of his music, inevitably ambivalent feelings about financial success and failure, the economics of the music industry, and the character of the larger social world.

A picture so carefully narrowed feels like an adaptation to current trends and tends to distort life somewhat.



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