

You Can Take the Boy Out of the Bush...

The Film *Doing Time for Patsy Cline*, argues BEN GOLDSMITH, venerates old country values and laments their decline in the modern age

What happens if you sing a country and western song backwards? You get your job back. Shep comes back to life, and your wife stops screwing your best mate.

Country music is an easy target for ridicule. Suspicious of the rawness of its passions, urban sophisticates contemptuously deride country's clichéd preoccupation with the emotional consequences of tragedy and loss, its simple and repetitive rhythms and tunes, its naive wholesomeness and its maudlin sentimentality. But country music is the soundtrack accompanying country life across much of inland Australia, as a flick of the dial outside metropolitan centres will readily confirm. It is the music of choice for rural communities, black and white, from Cooktown to Esperance and points in between perhaps because, in its epic forms, the tales of injustice, of inevitable and fateful tragedy, strike a chord with those who strive to survive on the land in the face of those forces - flood, drought, disease, love - which humans can neither tame nor fully understand. Indeed, country is enjoying something of a boom at the moment, with three of the five free to air television stations (Channels 7 and 9, and the ABC) all about to put to air a series which will showcase Australian country music. According to recently released statistics from the Country Music Association of Australia, over 5 million people report a fondness for country music, with 21% of respondents to the CMAA survey listing country as their favourite style. It is this popularity, and conversely the undercurrent of derision for the music, to which *Doing Time for Patsy Cline* attempts to appeal. And given a decent run at cinemas (never a certainty for Australian films) the movie should find a ready and appreciative audience.

Country is in many ways a soundtrack or musical style perfectly suited to the loose genre of road movie with its narratives of the quest for self-discovery (often in flight from the law or from social or domestic repression), where travel across huge distances provides the backdrop for an exploration of self or society. Country songs are often paeans to the nobility of the human spirit in the face of insuperable odds, be that unrequited love, the weight of the law, or the forces of nature. In this way the country song, like the road movie, forms part of a longstanding tradition in Australian narrative that celebrates what Ross Gibson calls "transcendental failure", the journey to heroic and ultimate (but ultimately blameless) tragedy familiar in the stories of *Voss*, *Burke and Wills*, *Gallipoli*, *Breaker Morant*, and *Phar Lap*. Importantly, these are all in one way or another celebrations of masculinity, or rather particular aspects of masculinity, said to originate in the itinerancy of the pioneers, gold-diggers, and shearers of the nineteenth century, and which are said to capture something of the Australian spirit. Yet these incarnations of tragic heroism are necessarily exclusionary, indicative only of particular kinds of masculine experience. Where the stories are women's stories, like Patsy Cline's *Crazy* which this film so consciously evokes, they too may be stories of tragic, unrequited love, but framed in a way which casts women primarily as victims, celebrating their endurance and suffering but ultimately offering only tragedy and, in Patsy Cline's case, premature death.

This quality of life exceeding art, exemplified in the life and death of Patsy Cline, is what makes country such a rich source of myth and legend, and such a ripe target for satire or cynical contempt. But as



any country fan will attest, there is an inherent (and affectionate) parodic quality about much of country music that pre-empt its detractors' attempts to send it up. It is this quality to which *Doing Time for Patsy Cline* tries to appeal, although, as the *Blues Brothers* demonstrated, there is a fine line between knowing, complicit and affectionate parody, and outright, derisive mockery of the music and sentiments of the fans of country music. My impression on first viewing Patsy was that the film had crossed this line; that it really detested country music and its loyal followers as much as Matt Day, the young actor playing an aspiring country musician, reputedly does. Happily second time around I felt the film's cynicism dissolved into what appeared to be an empathetic celebration of the spirit of the country personified in the laconic stoicism of Ralph's parents.

Doing Time for Patsy Cline is a deceptively richly layered film, its seemingly simple structure belying the depth and subtlety of its subject matter. It is, more properly, three interwoven films (or rather, at least three interwoven films), the first the story of a young, wide-eyed, ambitious country lad Ralph (Day) embarking on a journey from his isolated sheep station home in outback New South Wales to Nashville, the centre of the country music world, where he hopes to make his fortune. While hitching a lift to Sydney to catch a plane he is picked up by Patsy (Miranda Otto as the spitting image of Susan Sarandon's Louise) and her lover Boyd (Richard Roxburgh) who have absconded with a consignment of drugs they are supposed to be transporting from Darwin to Adelaide. Ralph and Boyd are captured and their incarceration in the cells of a small country town police station forms the basis of the second film as they wait for the local magistrate to visit on his weekly rounds and secure their fate. Boyd spins bullshit yarns of his colourful, globetrotting past to affirm his superiority and justify his contempt for Ralph and their fellow inmates, although ultimately it is Ralph, true to his bush heritage, who teaches Boyd about the human values of decency, loyalty, and trust.

By the end of the film Ralph himself has not only matured, but has gained some of the experience of suffering and injustice that is a requirement for the budding country musician.

The third film insistently cuts across the first two. Shot largely through blue or purple filters to give the impression of neon-lit hyperreality and to contrast with the earthy brown tones and harsh, bright, natural light of the Australian sequences, these episodes are set, it is implied, in Nashville some time in the future. Given the points of intersection and the depth of thought that obviously went in to their juxtaposition, it would seem to me that these scenes demand to be read as Ralph's dreams or imagination of the future, as frequently the cut back to his present is motivated by someone or something disturbing his train of thought: his father entering his room as he prepares to leave on his odyssey; Boyd bursting in to his motel room as Ralph lies, perfectly innocently, with a sleeping Patsy on the bed; a loony rural-feral fellow-inmate interrupting the letter he is writing to his mum and dad with his claims to have slept with Marilyn Monroe. In the Nashville sequences (which are structured like an epic country song), Ralph initially meets up with aspiring singer Patsy at an audition which they both fail. Teaming up to perform a song Ralph has written himself (the suitably ironic "Dead Red Roses"), they are reborn as the Fabulous Madison Twins, and, managed by Boyd under the guidance of the stereotypically irrepressible Connie (Betty Bobbitt) and Tyrone Parker (Gus Mercurio), they secure a gig at the ultimate country venue, the Grand Ole Opry. This being both the incarnation of a country song and a road movie, however, tragedy inevitably lurks in the shadows. Echoing the stories of a dozen or more musicians from Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper to Stevie Ray Vaughan, and of course Patsy Cline herself, Boyd is killed in a plane crash on a cold and stormy night on the way to the next gig. On the cusp of superstardom, Ralph decides to turn his back on the country music merry-go-round, and returns to Australia, leaving Patsy to make it

on her own in the short time left to her by the cancer that is killing her from the inside. To top off the melodramatic intensity of these scenes, the record company agent who appears at the crash site to sign Patsy to a lucrative recording deal turns out to be the long lost son of Tyrone and Connie.

Patsy Cline is, for the most part, an impressive feature with plenty to please the country music initiate and the aficionado alike, albeit with one glaring exception. In their first conversation about country music, Patsy tells Ralph that she was named after Patsy Cline by her (now dead) mother, and asks him whether he has seen the film of her life, *The Coalminer's Daughter* which, as any country or movie buff will know, is the story of another tragic country heroine, Loretta Lynn. Other than this faux pas there are some neat touches, like the opening credits sequence where Ralph sings Patsy Cline's first hit "Walking after Midnight" at his first, abortive audition. These gestures to mythic moments and iconic events are not solely confined to country music, however; the scene in which Ralph is led by three officers from the police station to the court across a pedestrian crossing is a sublime reworking of the cover of *Abbey Road*, with Ralph taking the place of the ghost of Paul McCartney.

Over the course of the film, which we see predominantly from Ralph's point of view, there is a subtle shift in the depiction of the country and its characters. Initially the frame is the mid-nineteenth century vision of the outback as a strange and hostile place which emits an atmosphere which Marcus Clarke, the author of a place where frustrated expectations and dashed hopes can only produce an idiosyncratic and ironic response in the naming of places, like the signpost which Ralph leans against at the start of his odyssey which points the way to "Dry Lake, 47". The camera does not linger lovingly on the landscape, or rely on the kind of touristic voyeurism which many Australian films use to generate a sense of place and to act as a shorthand for their originality and difference, since there seems to be a recognition that this is only a very superficial representation of the land and its rhythms. Instead the film relies on characters like Ralph's laconic parents to flesh out the land, albeit through affectionate parody of their stoic, quirky but deeply practical and fatalist ways (Ralph's father's sole piece of advice as his son prepares to leave the farm is to warn him not to bring any thin-hipped city women out to the country because "we're too far from the doctor for that sort of luxury"). Ralph's journey to maturity and his education in the venal ways of the world are counterbalanced by his father's declining health, itself a metaphor for the gradual disappearance of older country ways. By the end of the film, these values which initially had been the source of mirth at the expense of Ralph's parents, are venerated as more natural, authentic and valid than those of the town- or city-dwellers Ralph meets on his journey. This is in many ways a conservative drift, but importantly it is made clear that Ralph intends to return home rather than follow the path of the majority of teenagers brought up in the country who leave the land for good, and that he is wiser and better equipped to cope with the vicissitudes of life on the land for the experience of leaving. Ralph's decision in his dream to exchange the artifice of bright lights and big cars for the more earthy, simpler pleasures of outback life seems, within the logic of the film, to be entirely justified. ■