

FILM

By JULIAN LEWIS



DOING TIME FOR PATSY CLINE

Don't be misled by the title of this latest Australian feature. Although it has a strong country connection throughout what has been described as a rhinestone Casablanca, 'Doing Time For Patsy Cline' is essentially a bittersweet road movie with a number of positives going for it, regardless of your opinion of the musical style dominating this clever three-hander.

Beginning in the outback of NSW (with filming taking place around Griffith), aspiring young country guitarist Ralph Smith (Matt Day) is the innocent rural son setting off to conquer Nashville with the words of his father's man-to-man talk still ringing in his ears, "Don't bring back any thin-hipped women", for complicated childbirth is not an option in this remote sheep-farming area.

Hitting the road to Sydney, he is picked up by an upmarket couple in a flash Jaguar, containing the laconic, coke-snorting Boyd

(Richard Roxburgh), who seems to have tackled everything in life and has a putdown line for each activity, and Patsy (Miranda Otto), a sweet, pale girl who slowly reveals that she has a voice and interest in both her companions.

It's not long before the bewildered Ralph finds himself in a small town prison cell, doing time with a trio of pathetic country and western playing inmates, each of whom introduces themselves with the unnecessary addendum of being there for grievous bodily harm, while simultaneously coping with Boyd's alternating assistance and double-dealing. Inspired by writer/producer/director Chris Kennedy's friend's tale of a lift in a Cadillac in Mexico that resulted in six weeks in jail, 'Doing Time For Patsy Cline' is a cleverly constructed yarn that has twists and turns that continually thwart any attempt at predicting its course, while its use of flash forwards to the trio's later success in Nashville itself tantalises the viewer with its hints of the resolution to the prison predicament.

Day is totally believable as the straight-shooting boy from the bush and can actually play the guitar to assist credibility, and Miranda Otto continues to impress with a role custom-made for her, neither as dark as in 'The Well' nor as lightweight as in the less memorable road movie 'True Love And Chaos'. But the strength of the movie is Roxburgh's performance, as the charming rogue who always walks that tightrope between bastard and beaut bloke, just as likely to cheer you with some genuinely funny lines before selling you down the river.

Photography and direction are both lean and assured, with the few shots of Nashville and Sydney allowing the film to breathe away from the road and prison cells. Fans of the real Patsy Cline will enjoy the parallels with her life and death, while non-country fans can sympathise with many of Boyd's comments and appreciate the biz from an insider's viewpoint, such as when Nashville manager Tyrone (Gus Mercurio) says that big heads on country stars look good on TV, with Dolly Parton, Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings each having heads on them like melons!

The pace rarely flags and much is packed into the film's ninety-five minutes that, like the best country songs, will make you laugh and make you sad. Happily, 'Doing Time' avoids sentimentality almost entirely and is time well spent in a cinema, with a film that will have universal appeal, yet retaining its truly Australian imprint.