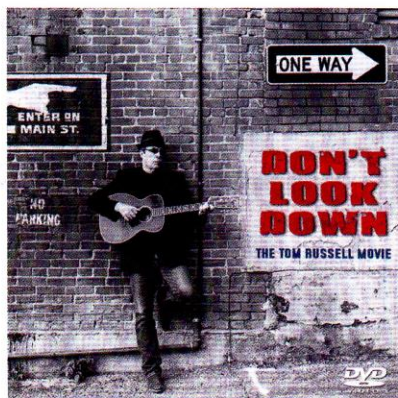


## DVD REVIEWS



### Tom Russell **DON'T LOOK DOWN**

TomRussell.com

★★★★☆

*A tightly edited synopsis of one hell of a songwriter's rocky musical road*

On the b&w front cover photograph that graces this DVD's LP-style card liner, guitar in hand, Tom leans against a brick wall in Bisbee, Arizona, just around the corner from the Café Roka Restaurant. There's probably no need to tell you that the DVD title is a parody of D A Pennebaker's 1967 Dylan opus, and production (of this documentary) is credited to Tom & Nadine Russell and Eric Temple. Temple and Russell co-produced the *MANO A MANO: THE SONGWRITERS WORKSHOP* (2008) DVD, co-headlined by Tom and Ian Tyson, which was shot in Elko, Nevada during the annual cowboy poetry gathering. Elko was also the location of Tom's marriage to Nadine. My understanding is that *DON'T LOOK DOWN* is self-financed production and has a thirty-one minute running time. The conundrum—'What to leave in, what to leave out?'

In the opening, decades old, b&w sequence a car drives down the highway at night as a radio dj announces the Pittsburgh debut by the Tom Russell Band, followed, appropriately, by their onstage rendition of *U.S. Steel*. Whether the ensuing photo montage of steel plant workers, furnaces, steel erectors and derelict buildings includes any from Pennsylvania's fabled Homestead Steel plant which closed in 1986, and is quoted in the aforementioned lyric—the site is now a shopping mall and waterpark—is open to interpretation, nevertheless Russell's intentional meaning regarding his homeland is implicit. As Russell narrates segments of his life story photo montages flash across the screen, and allied to tight editing, it's an expedient that works well. Nevertheless, it's worth mentioning that the range of historic video segments, b&w and colour, included on

this DVD, from Russell's band days through his solo act years, furnish a clear indication that an archive of significant proportions exists. Without spilling the whole can of beans, by way of précising this DVD's contents, here's a few highlights. Alluding to his palpable restlessness growing up in Los Angeles during the 1950s/1960s, Tom recalls: 'In 1964 I saw Bob Dylan singing *Desolation Row* at the Hollywood Bowl. That moment made me decide where my future might be.' Six years later Russell finally took his music 'on the road,' playing initially in topless bars and such and, ironically, sometimes performing gospel songs. At the dawn of the new millennium he made his Letterman Show debut.

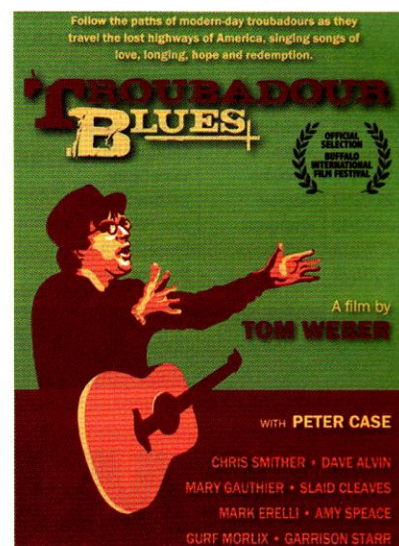
Tom fondly remembers his bohemian bachelor pianist uncle, George Molloy Jr., movie actor and one-time Larry Adler sideman. His love for the beat poets and writers manifests itself with San Francisco based Lawrence Ferlinghetti reading Tom's *The Pugilist At 59* lyric. The poet/bookshop owner also appeared on *WOUNDED HEART OF AMERICA* (2007). Tom tips his cap to sociologist/criminologist and mentor Dr. William Chambliss, followed by recollections of the, then nascent, musician's Peace Corps sojourn in war torn Nigeria/Biafra. Sequences from the Temple produced, edited and directed *HEARTS ON THE LINE* (2005), Tom's debut DVD, are reprised—from onscreen spoken memories of his early life, to visiting skid row in Vancouver, British Columbia, where, circa the early 1970s, he cut his teeth musically. There's the Hardin & Russell years—female and male—while any self-respecting fan from a quarter of a century back should know the Robert Hunter/*Gallo del Cielo* story—THE critical career turning point musically.

As for famous friends, Gretchen Peters pegs Tom as the: 'Hemingway of songwriters,' Nanci Griffith offers the insight: 'Tom has been a major influence in American music,' while Dave Alvin adds: 'I like pictures being painted in my head. Tom has the ability to paint vivid pictures.' Alvin nails the music business' current sorry state with: 'It's not an appreciated type of songwriting anymore.' Instant gratification pervades literally every facet of contemporary life including facile, fast food music that the masses, sans an edit button, consume all too readily and easily. Russell's late twentieth century relocation to El Paso, Texas, the Charlie Hunter organised train rides through Canada, Mexico and America's West Coast, his post 2003 painting addiction—'keeps me out of the bars'—are

mentioned. As for recent occurrences, there's the 2010 Los Angeles premiere of director Monte Hellman's first movie for some two decades *Road To Nowhere*, with the Russell penned soundtrack. Finally there's Thomas George Russell's latest musical opus, *MESABI*. Tom intones: 'the human yearns for a good song.' *MESABI* is, hands down, his finest musical creation. Innocently I thought *BLOOD AND CANDLE SMOKE* (2009) was the peak. Which bodes well for the future, doesn't it ... ?

**Arthur Wood**

[www.tomrussell.com](http://www.tomrussell.com)



### Various **TROUBADOUR BLUES**

Tom Weber Video

★★★★

*Thankfully the art of songwriting is alive and well in the hands of the travelling troubadours*

Before the *TROUBADOUR BLUES* opening titles roll, Buffalo, New York-born Peter Case is seen performing *Poor Old Tom* at four different venues, following which the songwriter intones: 'You got to look inside your heart, and you've got to look at people around you and listen to their voices, and you've got to find the song in there that's worth singing. You've got to find it, and you got to go with it wherever it goes.' Directed by Tom Weber, an independent filmmaker based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, *TROUBADOUR BLUES* is his first feature-length documentary. On his web site Weber writes: 'I've played music at a local level since childhood, and I have a particular interest in musicians who develop their craft to the highest levels with little regard for mainstream fame or celebrity.' Weber began working on this documentary