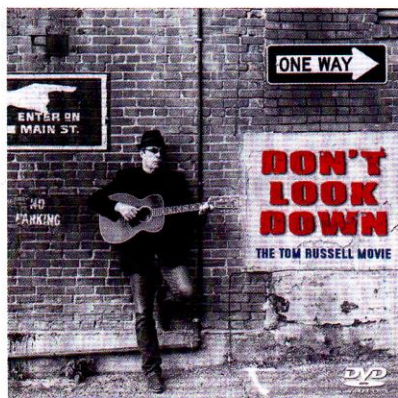


## DVD REVIEWS



### 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.

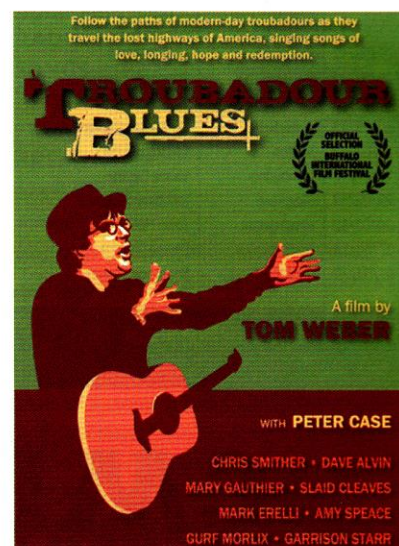
Tom fondly remembers his bohemian bachelor pianist uncle, George Molloy Jr., movie actor and one-time Larry Adler sideman. His love for the beat poets and writers manifests itself with San Francisco based Lawrence Ferlinghetti reading Tom's *The Pugilist At 59* lyric. The poet/bookshop owner also appeared 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

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during 2002, by day he teaches digital filmmaking and video production at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, is a member of Folk Alliance International, and is also an active participant in regional and national folk conferences.

While the principle player in this documentary is Case, there are spoken and musical contributions from Chris Smither, Mark Erelli, Amy Speace, Karl Mullen, Slaid Cleaves, Garrison Starr, RB Morris, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Mary Gauthier, Troy Campbell, Dave Alvin, Sam Baker, Anne McCue, Gurf Morlix and Jeff Talmadge. Relative to HEARTWORN HIGHWAYS (1976), I guess you could look upon TROUBADOUR BLUES as its 21<sup>st</sup> century twin. In the first sequence, Morlix encapsulates the day-to-day life of the travelling troubadour as one where he's ostensibly a driver, then adds: 'The good part of your day is when you get to be on stage for an hour and a half,' a sentiment echoed by Case's son Joshua and Dave Alvin. Having found himself in the rare circumstance of playing two consecutive nights in the same town, Mark Erelli admits to the audience: 'I didn't know what to do with myself today, during the time I'd normally be doing the six hour drive. It was a wonderful feeling of absolute nothingness,' while RB Morris likens his lifestyle to that of: 'a circuit preacher riding a horse from town to town, preaching the word so to speak.' Jeff Talmadge reflects that observations made while driving regularly find their way into his lyrics, following which, to emphasise the point, he performs *Take A Drive With Me*.

The youthful urge to be going and the exploration of a bigger world is the documentary's next sub-text, with Case reflecting on the many times he left home (only to curiously return there decades later) allied to a performance of *Who's Gonna Go Your Crooked Mile*. Albeit with tongue-in-cheek, Case pegs Homer as the first singer-songwriter because of his epic poem *The Odyssey*, while, underage, music lessons for Alvin, and privileged ones at that, amounted to his sneaking into bars to witness 'the giants who still roamed the Earth;— Lightning Hopkins, Big Joe Turner, T-Bone Walker and Bukka White. Recalling a performance of Jimmy LaFave's *RIBBON OF HIGHWAY*, ENDLESS SKYWAY song tribute to Woody Guthrie, Erelli intimates that considering the Oklahoman's thought-provoking lyrics—death penalty, fascism, governmental corruption—he was saddened by the fact that songs written before and immediately after WWII, could in fact have been written 'last week.' That

night he walked from the venue with an 'appreciation for the beauty of a lasting song that remains relevant,' tempered by the conclusion that relative to what had inspired Guthrie 'things aren't getting any better.' And if you're not already aware, it's an Erelli composition that furnishes this documentary with its title and it plays over the closing credits.

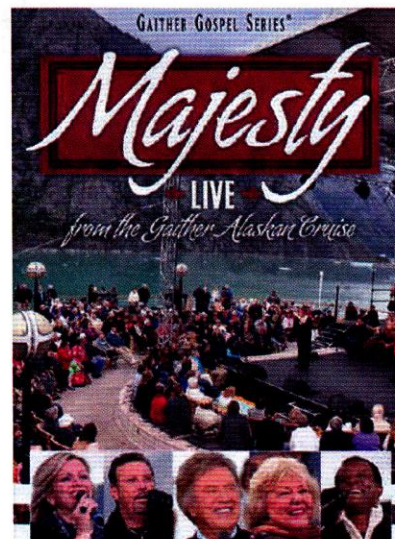
Smither reflects that the internet has assisted established troubadours, and for that matter youngsters starting out, to publicise their tours and recordings, thereby nurturing their careers. While not mentioned, negative issues have arisen in the new millennium particularly fuel costs. It's for certain that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century major record labels have no interest in the career of these troubadours. Concurrently, the seemingly endless stream of glitzy (but utterly vapid), karaoke, song contests on television is the most pernicious ill to have been inflicted on music in the new millennium. Where's the originality? Furthermore, twelve months down the road, Joe Public doesn't give a damn who won last year, as they're into another series. Such contests, and the music business, deservedly receive a verbal kicking from Morlix and Campbell, while Speace is slightly more ambivalent about this ill. Music careers with longevity are constructed on hard work and time spent learning the trade, NOT on a few weeks of prime time television exposure!

A significant segment of the documentary is rightfully given over to the art of writing original, thought-provoking songs. Speace suggests that a song has done its job if it achieves 'communion with the audience,' while Gauthier offers: 'I don't know how to please an audience,' then intimates that her goal is to write 'truthful songs' that offer hope. She then adds: 'The truth is a challenge for some folks.' Dave Carter, America's finest ever songwriter, passed in 2002, having only performed nationally for a handful of years. His life and legacy are recalled by performing partner Tracy Grammer, as well as Smither and Gauthier. Musically there are performances of Carter's *The Power And The Glory* and *Crocodile Man*, and Gauthier's personal tribute *Wheel Inside The Wheel*. With troubadour mortality firmly in focus, the closing ten minutes of TROUBADOUR BLUES are given over to Case. In 2009 he underwent emergency by-pass heart surgery, and time is given to his post-surgery career including an appearance on the syndicated radio show *Mountain Stage*. This one's for the musicians who roam America's lost highways far from the media spotlight,

singing songs of love, longing, hope and redemption, living the Troubadour Blues.

**Arthur Wood**

[www.troubadour-blues.com](http://www.troubadour-blues.com)



### Various Artists MAJESTY, LIVE FROM THE GAITHER ALASKAN CRUISE

Gaither Gospel Series. SHDVD4837

★★★★

*A unique live recording from the back of a cruise ship*

Against the backdrop of some of the most spectacular scenery you could wish to see, this great value for money DVD puts you on a cruise ship with the Gaithers to enjoy a concert like no other! Opening with a rousing rendition of the title track, the DVD features many strong stalwarts from the Gaither Homecoming Series: The very powerful Gene McDonald sings *I Know Who Holds My Hand* before we get a couple of contributions from the Gaither Vocal Band *My Lord And I* and *Satisfied*. Other notable artists are the Isaacs who contribute the original piece *Little Bit Of Heaven* and the black gospel singer Larnelle Harris who sings *Amen* and closes the DVD with an extremely powerful rendition of *I've Just Seen Jesus* sung as a duet with Ladye Love Smith. Also included is footage from some of the places and things they saw in Alaska such as waterfalls, whales and good places to eat! This is a very joyous DVD, but it also has its serious moments as Bill recalls that his former pianist Anthony Burger died on a cruise some years ago and there is a moving tribute to his widow and daughter who are both on board. One of the best Gaither DVDs I have seen in a while. **David Brassington**

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