

# CINEMA

## Songwriter

Alan Rudolph's *Songwriter* is a frenetic, fast-paced comedy set in the world of country music. Willie Nelson stars as Doc Jenkins, a composer/musician/self-styled outlaw with a "burning commitment to succeed by his wits without stooping to work." Kris Kristofferson is his best friend and old singing partner Blackie Buck, a country rocker who still tours even though Doc has given up the road for a cushy producer position. Melinda Dillon is Honey Carder, retired country superstar and Doc's ex-wife. A good ten years of their lives together is covered in the opening credits sequence before the story starts in earnest, but the introduction sets the style and tone for the film as well as the background. The opening shot has Doc and Blackie performing together in a southern styled bar, but a split second before their faces come into view we see a beer bottle hurled into the

### REVIEW

chicken wire that surrounds the singers. Like this opening image we never know what to expect. Blackie narrates the sequence with an informal attitude that carries on through the whole film and in particular sets the eclectic narrative approach. Whatever preconceptions one might have had before coming in, Rudolph erases in quick bold strokes. This is his film all down the line.

*Songwriter* is a clever satire of the music business and a celebration of the people at its heart—the singers and the songwriters. Doc is a particularly famous songwriter, but he hasn't written a verse since signing an exclusive contract with Nashville mogul Rodeo Rocky (Richard C. Sarafin), a wheeling-dealing entrepreneur who has Doc by the balls and won't let him go. Doc is content to play around in his music studio until Rocky digs the screws in. It turns out that Rocky owns the studio, the master tapes, Doc's personal cash flow and, in effect, Doc himself. No more alimony payments, no more dub tapes, no more money until Doc writes

more songs or releases an album, and Doc refuses to let someone else take his songs.

The plot gets a little complicated after this, but it can be nicely summed up in Doc's declaration to Blackie: "I got cheated and I want to get even." This is no ordinary revenge tale, though, not from the hands of Alan Rudolph. He makes the most of the opportunities afforded in Bud Shrake's witty script with his eclectic approach and his fine ensemble cast. Nelson is a natural as the happy-go-lucky Doc, and Kristofferson brings an easygoing presence to Blackie. But by far the most outstanding (and funniest) performance belongs to Rip Torn, who plays the sleazy but admirable Dino McCliesh, a would-be mogul who just can't get it together. Torn has been an underrated actor all his career, but this is a particularly crazed performance, meshing perfectly with the assortment of characters populating this tale. Rudolph pulls the unique individual performances together (which include a genial singer played by Leslie Ann Warren and the sweetest of all people in Dillon's Honey Carder) into a great ensemble presentation almost as good as his last film *Choose Me*.

There's a lot here, in fact, that merits comparison to *Choose Me*: the personal, honest style; the satirical wit that doesn't leave anything (or anyone) untouched; the humanism that allows you to like all of the characters—flaws and all. *Songwriter* may not be as slick or stylish as *Choose Me* but its energy and drive and sheer amiability put it in a different category. Topping it off is the music. You don't have to like country to enjoy Kris and Willie crooning their country rock because they just have so much fun performing. Their enthusiasm is as infectious as their spontaneity.

*Songwriter* is a welcome feature, a genuinely adult comedy that is witty, honest and intelligent, a satire that isn't too venal so as to forget the innate beauty of its characters. It may not be as perfect or as formally beautiful as *Choose Me*, but I certainly haven't had as much fun at an American comedy in a long time.

—Sean Axmaker



Stop Making Sense, a performance film of The Talking Heads, opens this week at the Bijou.

## NOW SHOWING

**Agnes of God:** A court-appointed psychiatrist (Jane Fonda) investigates whether a young nun (Meg Tilly), charged with murdering her newborn baby, is capable of standing trial. Anne Bancroft plays the mother superior. McDonald (344-4343).

**Back to the Future:** A boy trips back to the past, and meets the teenagers who'll become his parents. West 11th (342-4142) and Springfield Quad (726-9073).

**Bad Medicine:** Comedy. A pre-med student furthers his education at a shady foreign medical school. Stars Steve Guttenberg (*Cocoon*) and Alan Arkin. West 11th (342-4142).

**Death Wish III:** Charles Bronson is back on the streets, doing what he does best. Playing with *Sweet Dreams* at Mayflower (345-1022).

**Jagged Edge:** Murder mystery. Glenn Close as a lawyer wondering whether her client deserves love or prison. Co-stars Jeff Bridges. Cinema World (342-6536).

**Kid Colter:** Starts this week at Springfield Quad (726-9073) and West 11th (342-4142).

**King Solomon's Mines:** Adventure. Richard Chamberlain looks something like Indiana Jones while searching for African treasure. National (344-3431).

**National Lampoon's European Vacation:** Chevy Chase and family rip the continent. Playing with *Summer Rental*. Fine Arts (747-2201).

**Once Bitten:** Comedy. Lauren Hutton plays a vampire in need of virgin blood. What, in California? Springfield Quad (726-9073).

**One Magic Christmas:** Non-animated holiday fare from Disney. Starts this week at Springfield Quad (726-9073) and Valley River Twin (686-8633).

**Pee-Wee's Big Adventure:** TV nerd Pee-Wee Herman stumbles onto the silver screen, where he's out to recover stolen goods. Showing with *Real Genius* at Oakway (342-5351).

**Plenty:** Meryl Streep as a woman reaching for much too much while sliding deeper and deeper. Playing at Cinema World (342-6536).

**Rainbow Bright and the Star Stealer:** Animated feature for the little ones. West 11th (342-4142) and Springfield Quad (726-9073).

**Real Genius:** A brilliant college prankster gets even with a nasty professor. A mind is a terrible thing to waste. With *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*. Oakway (342-5351).

**Songwriter:** Willie Nelson and Kris Kristofferson poke fun at the country music business. Lots of original songs round out this satire. Directed by Alan Rudolph (*Choose Me*). Cinema 7 (687-0733).

**Stop Making Sense:** The performance film of wonder David Byrne and the Talking Heads. Starts this week at the Bijou (686-2458).

**The Stuff:** Comedy. A very strange, delicious, yet evil dessert has a bizarre effect upon its consumers. Cinema World (342-6536).

**Summer Rental:** John Candy takes his family for a stressful vacation at the beach. With *National Lampoon's European Vacation*. Fine Arts (747-2201).

**Sweet Dreams:** Jessica Lange portrays country-western singer Patsy Cline. Co-stars Ed Harris. Plays with *Death Wish III*. Mayflower (345-1022).

**Target:** A father and son search for their abducted wife and mother. Arthur Penn (*Bonnie and Clyde*) directs Gene Hackman and Matt Dillon. Springfield Quad (726-9073).

**That Was Then, This is Now:** Two boys grow up as brothers, then come to a time for change. Starring Emilio Estevez (*The Breakfast Club*, *Repo Man*), who also wrote the screenplay. Valley River Twin (686-8633).

**To Live and Die in L.A.:** Action-drama. Secret Service agents on the trail of a murderous counterfeiter. Cinema World (342-6536).

—Michael "Senseless" Sussman

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