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The American Astronaut (2001)

Rating: 3 Stars (out of 4)



Astro-nuts

By Jeffrey M. Anderson

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I was completely unaware of the San Francisco band The Billy Nayer Show when I went to see the new film *The American Astronaut*, written by, directed by and starring front man Cory McAbee. So I pretty much went in with a blank slate.

However, within the first few minutes of the film, I knew I was watching something that could conceivably become the next *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. *The American Astronaut* is a hugely imaginative, genuinely weird cult item that only the most cynical and bizarre moviegoers will get a kick out of.

One of two movies opening today shot in black and white (the other is *The Man Who Wasn't There*), *The American Astronaut* begins when Samuel Curtis (McAbee) lands his spaceship at an intergalactic bar situated on one of the larger asteroids occupying the space between Mars and Jupiter.

A narrator then explains the semi-complicated plot to us. Curtis' new job calls for him to trade a cat for a cloned female living in a box, take the female to the men-only planet Jupiter where he swaps her for the Boy Who Has Seen a Woman's Breast (Gregory Russell Cook), then take the Boy to Venus to trade him for the dead body of a male breeder, and finally take the body back to its grieving family on Earth.



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Simple enough, until two problems arise. Firstly the narrator is none other than Professor Hess (Rocco Sisto), Curtis' old nemesis who kills everyone without reason. On the other hand, he won't kill if he does have a reason. ("That doesn't make any sense," says the Boy Who Has Seen a Woman's Breast, and he's right, but it's an interesting idea.) The second problem comes when Curtis and the Boy take refuge in a Cabin in the Sky to hide from the rapidly approaching Professor.

In the Cabin in the Sky, they find a family of mutants who launched themselves into space generations ago and now cannot return to Earth as their mutated bodies can no longer stand its atmosphere. They do have a son (James Ransone) who turned out physically normal, but is mentally unsound. In exchange for chocolate and cigarettes, Curtis agrees to take the son back to Earth.

Did I mention that *The American Astronaut* is a musical? In the grand tradition of weird San Francisco bands like Primus or The Residents, tll Billy Nayer Show's music is truly bizarre, and ranges from rockabilly t little rhyming chants to sideways Off-Broadway-type numbers. My favorite came early in the film, when Curtis uses the restroom at the asteroid bar. Two older gents enter, set up a record player, and begin singing a tune called "Hey Boy" -- much to the chagrin of the indisposed Curtis in the bathroom stall. They end the number by taking a Polaroid photo of him from over the top of the door.

The American Astronaut is so fiercely, gruelingly homemade, with its cheesy still-photo outer space effects, its low-light photography (designed to cover up cheap-looking sets) and its anything-goes screenplay, that it's hard to believe it actually went through the Sundan Lab (*Haiku Tunnel* made a similar journey).

The film's major problem stems from the fact that McAbee clearly intended *The American Astronaut* to be a cult item, and the old adage goes that a cult movie can't seek out its audience, but that the audience seeks out a cult item. And, so by his sheer attempts at weirdness, McAbee may be isolating his own fans (*Glitter* anyone?). More to the point, the film works like gangbusters sometimes, and flails about at other times.

Still, his very attempt offers more in the way of imagination than any dozen Hollywood pictures this year. And as long as his fans nurse a ne for the bizarre, they'll feel at home in this space opera.

DVD Details: The good people at [Facets](#) have finally given us a DVD three years later, but it's a good one. The movie itself comes with both mono and stereo mixes; optional subtitles come in English, Spanish an French. The high-contrast black-and-white looks right at home on DVI and it's most likely that this weird little film will find its biggest audience this way. The disc comes with plenty of art: phtotos, drawing storyboards and posters, plus a few other odd items best left up to the viewer to discover. Best of all, it has a *live* commentary track from

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director McAbee, which means that he recorded it in front of an audience with no editing, rather than in a studio (his studio attempt made the technician fall asleep).

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Starring: Cory McAbee, Rocco Sisto, Gregory Russell Cook, Annie Golden, James Ransone, Joshua Taylor, Tom Aldredge

Written by: Cory McAbee

Directed by: Cory McAbee

MPAA Rating: NR

Running Time: 91 minutes

Date: October 31, 2001

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