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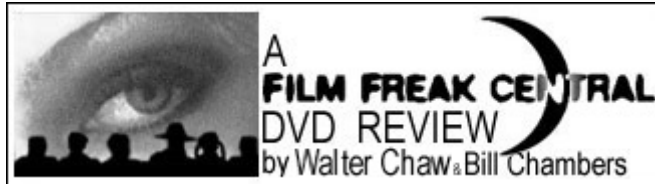
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SUPPORT FILM FREAK CENTRAL:



THE AMERICAN ASTRONAUT

(2001)
* * * * (out of four)

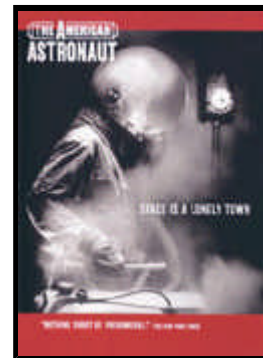
starring Cory McAbee, Rocco Sisto, Gregory Russell Cook, Annie Golden
written and directed by Cory McAbee

Opening with a mordant prologue that reminds of the expressionless absurdist sensibility of the late Douglas Adams and proceeding through something somewhere between *Six-String Samurai* and *Dead Man* (but a science-fiction musical), Cory McAbee's *The American Astronaut* is dead brilliant. Demonstrating a truly dazzling level of technical proficiency (despite or due to what must have been a non-budget) and a breathless creativity fecund and macabre, the picture reminds of Harlan Ellison, *Dr. Strangelove*, and *Dark Star* in equal measure. Ultimately, *The American Astronaut* is something all its own, a film that sets itself up as an old-fashioned serial and goes on to explore cinematic and literary theory with a keen eye for composition and an ear for mad scenario and perverse dialogue. The reasoning is Beckett, the execution is Brecht and Weill, and the results are best described as an educational reel directed by David Lynch circa *Eraserhead*: self-aware and hallucinatory.

Samuel Curtis (Cory McAbee, acting as director, writer, star, and composer) is a space trader, a procurer of rare items who gives up a cat (named "Monkeypuss") for a cloned pre-woman in a box. He trades *that* package for a boy (Gregory Russell Cook) on an all-male Saturn colony whose nightly description of a woman's breast (a sight he alone on the outpost has glimpsed) provides the miners inspiration to continue in their labors. Curtis intends to deliver the Boy Who Actually Saw a Woman's Breast to a Venus that, populated only by Victorian women nearly too snooty for their own good, needs a fresh stud every few years to keep their elitism in check. Meanwhile, old pal Professor Hess (Rocco Sisto), apparently angered by a forgotten birthday, pursues Curtis across the solar system, leaving a trail of vapourized innocents in his wake.

Informed by sprung rhythms and the kind of twisted logic conferred by

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McAbee [here!](#)



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DVD GRADES:
Image **B**
Sound **A**
Extras **A-**

DVD VITALS:
RunningTime
91 minutes
MPAA
Not Rated
AspectRatio(s)
1.75:1 ONLY
Languages
English DD 5.1,
English Stereo,
English Mono
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gestalt rather than more conventional narratives, *The American Astronaut* is a Rorschach Test on film, a series of stills evoking space travel in a kind of Tardis-by-way-of-Appalachia construct (boxy on the outside, a honky-tonk flophouse on the inside), with its most interesting moments coming in a public restroom and in a series of scored stills that reminded more than a little of Pakula's Parallax Test. McAbee's approach is utterly serious, marking the film's illogicalities with the stamp of conviction essential to successful ironies--many of its images (courtesy of inspired DP W. Mott Hupfel III), from flashlights in a space-barn to a madman dancing in a field of ash mounds, are sticky and breathtaking.

While not without its stray lull, *The American Astronaut* is alive in a way that films just aren't anymore. It's a collection of homage and invention that demonstrates that a knowledge of film isn't a sentence of pomposity and that discursive genius doesn't necessarily predict a cultish incomprehensibility. There's something dangerous and exciting at work in *The American Astronaut*; the picture is a dry comedy, the throwback to the operatic space serials that George Lucas' narcoleptic spectacles are unfairly credited with being, and so drunk with the possibilities of creation that as a collective experience it is rejuvenating. McAbee, frontman for performance art band **The Billy Nayer Show** (which composed *The American Astronaut's* twisted book and score), has made a film that is all possibilities and dreaming--juvenilia elevated to critical theory and high art, heady and delirious with passion and the freedom to stretch.-**Walter Chaw**

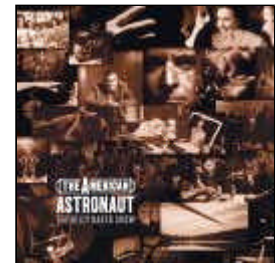
Yes
Subtitles
French, Spanish
DVD-9
Region One
Factory 515



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ASTRONAUT
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Published: February 8,
2005



1.75:1 DVD capture: *The American Astronaut*

After four long years, one of the decade's best is finally available on DVD from Factory 515 (in association with Facets Video). What took *The American Astronaut* so long? According to the "live commentary" by writer-director-star Cory McAbee, no distributor seemed trustworthy enough. No harm done, of course, as the unavailability of the film to rent or own enabled it to become the first or rare revival classic of the digital age (with Boulder, Colorado leading the movement to ritualize screenings of *The American Astronaut*, *Rocky Horror*-style), a rather fitting fate for

such a prog-rock piece of cinema and a likely guarantor of home video success. The shame of the disc is that it's been mastered like it's 2001 all over again, which is to say that the otherwise state-of-the-art 1.75:1 widescreen presentation is non-anamorphic. Certainly it looks a lot more handsome than my second-generation VHS dub does, and high-contrast, 35mm black-and-white lends itself to the format, but since we're likely stuck with this release until well into the standardization of HiDef, it'd be nice to have a version that filled out our 16x9 displays. Audio comes in three flavours: mono, stereo, or "surround," the last option being a Dolby Digital 5.1 remix that is definitely the way to go, as the all-important song score sounds appropriately cosmic this way and the dialogue is at optimal volume.

Extras begin with "Ceres Jump Test Footage," a minute's worth of McAbee hopping down the street in slow-motion to see how effectively he could suggest walking in zero-g atmosphere. (It's a thoroughly useless supplement, and I'm fairly confident that it's only here to justify the inclusion of the guitar riff that accompanies it.) Conversely worth every click is a 7-part gallery in which you'll find a dozen or so evocative storyboards; 16 gorgeous poster concepts, each of which utilizes one of two key poses from McAbee; lush sidewalk art (by McAbee himself) promoting *The American Astronaut's* premiere at the Angelika; on set stills, providing an opportunity to see the shoot in colour; DVD credits; impressively-detailed production & graphic designs for *faux* product placements and ingenious mock book titles like Run Coward Run by Kevin Cherry; and the Easter egg-ish "Rio Yeti," that bizarre verse-- "Don't you fear the Yeti's in Rio?" "No, No, No, No, No, No"--transcribed and partially illustrated.

As for the aforementioned live commentary, it's McAbee soliciting questions from the patrons of Brooklyn bar Union Pool while *The American Astronaut* unspools behind him in its entirety. The reason he did it this way, he explains, is that his attempt to record a traditional yak-track put the guy at the controls to sleep--at least this gives him a fighting chance to touch on what interests the average viewer. One hypothesizes that McAbee went in there with the thought that he might come out with performance art, but the ensuing inquiry is less impulsive than it is automatic; still, McAbee tackles their festival-trite questions (e.g. How much did it cost? How long did it take to write?) with a comprehensiveness that either justifies or invalidates the presence of a half-captive audience. Explored in the greatest depth are the film's genesis--from the inspiration of McAbee's nomadic existence as a "freelance bouncer" to his acceptance into the Sundance Screenwriter's Lab without even applying (turns out it really is who you know, not that his good fortune was undeserved)--and aesthetic, with McAbee implying that he shot *The American Astronaut* in black-and-white because it better connoted offscreen space, thus transforming limited locations into intimate locations. Perhaps against the odds, it's an extremely compelling rap session, though I wish he had steered clear of an anti-intellectual detour wherein he proudly declares that he doesn't read, for he's an

influential personality. *The American Astronaut's* excellent theatrical trailer rounds out the platter, a must-have for the film alone.-**Bill Chambers**

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