



The American Astronaut

USA - 2000

Movie Review By Casey McCabe

A funny thing happened in the first few seconds of *The American Astronaut*, the new semi-autobiographical black and white musical space western: I suspended disbelief. This is important for any semi-autobiographical black and white musical space western, but especially for those with small budgets. The kind that ask you to believe a dimly lit wood paneled bar is actually a space port on the asteroid Ceres. By the time the film used barely animated hand painted sketches to depict space travel, I was neither surprised nor disappointed.

Would it help if I described the film as a cross between *Eraserhead* and *Chitty-Chitty Bang Bang*?

I didn't think so.

The American Astronaut was written, directed by and stars Cory McAbee as astronaut Samuel Curtis. The music is provided by McAbee's band, *The Billy Nayer Show*, which has been prowling the fringes of San Francisco for over a decade now. If this smells suspiciously like a vanity project, it's not the typical indulgence of the rock star or filmmaker, but the vanity of a painter who paints entirely for his own amusement and can only hope that someone out there will share his aesthetic.

The set up here is that space is a dirty business. Like the Old West before it, the solar system is the province of rogues, loners, horse traders and miners. The plot, which is not entirely clear or necessary, involves Interplanetary trader Samuel Curtis landing on the asteroid Ceres to deliver a cat to the saloon owner. As payment he receives a homemade cloning device that is in the process of creating a Real Live Girl. With a tip from his former dance partner, the interplanetary fruit thief known as *The Blueberry Pirate*, Curtis heads for Jupiter where he plans to trade the Real Live Girl for *The Boy Who Actually Saw a Woman's Breast*, who is considered a deity on the all-male mining planet. Curtis then plans to take *The Boy* to Venus and trade for the remains of the late Johnny R., the lone man on the all-woman planet, before heading back Earth to claim the reward from Johnny R's family. Along the way, as so often happens in these cases, Curtis is escaping his nemesis Professor Hess, when he runs into some Nevada Silver Miners who have been living in an orbiting space barn since the late 1800s.

There's a theme winding through everything here, and from my position as an armchair psychoanalyst, I'd say it has something to do with grown men still seeking out their lost fathers.

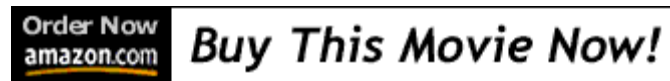
But what's so darned endearing about *The American Astronaut* is its good-natured fearlessness. In crafting a semi-autobiographical black and white musical space western, McAbee has created his own specific gravity, where old jokes actually do get funnier the more they're told and the slightest bit of humanity warms up the vast empty spaces.

Wonderfully envisioned, creatively shot, entertainingly scored and undeniably weird, The American Astronaut could very well be the most haunting movie this Halloween season.

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