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The Nayer has landed

With indie film release *The American Astronaut*, the Billy Nayer Show touches down on a whole new planet.

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IT ALL STARTED back in the late '80s, a time of charming acronyms like LBO and CEO and colorful phrases like "hostile takeover" and "dirty dancing," when we learned to stop worrying and love the junk bond. It was a simpler time, when the population of this land barely exceeded a quiet 226,546,000 and the "me decade" had given way to the "splurge generation." Billionaires – Ivan Boesky, Leona Helmsley, Donald Trump – rose and fell like plump red franks at the ballpark.

Two partnerships made the year 1988 stand out from the rest. The first was summed up not so neatly by George Bush the Elder in one of his memorable gaffes before an audience at the College of Southern Idaho. Eulogizing the Reagan administration, the V.P. confessed, "I'm proud to be his partner. We've had triumphs, we've made mistakes, we've had sex." The candidate quickly caught himself – "Setbacks," he corrected, "we've had setbacks" – but his meaning was plain enough. The former CIA man

Parallel universe

WOMEN MAY BE from Venus, but men are not from Mars. In the Billy Nayer Show universe of *The American Astronaut*, the men are largely sequestered on Jupiter, a *Metropolis*-tic planet of mining drudgery, where the only highlight of their sooted lives is the occasional stage show where the Boy Who Actually Saw a Woman's Breast, a fresh-faced teenager in Mercury drag, entertains them with a short description of the momentous event: "It was round and soft," he deadpans. On an asteroid somewhere far away, a comedian takes the stage at a dusty old bar and tells jokes with no punch lines. The audience laughs, but only during obscure and irrelevant moments of the joke's buildup. The American astronaut himself gets assaulted in a men's room of that bar by two

and the actor had wed their ideas and personalities to forge the defining relationship of the end of the cold war. And in San Francisco another fruitful alliance was born, resonating with the same giddy epoch.

The Billy Nayer Show, the unique musical art project conceived by Cory McAbee and Bobby Lurie, was, like the American ship of state, in it for the long haul. In its brash, mischievous way it signaled a retreat from the era of "a thousand points of light" into an alternately foreboding and ecstatic world of light and shadow. Musically, it represented an advance from the (albeit enduring) ephemeral spirit of punk rock. It was more unabashedly childish than punk and at the same time far more grown-up. Its sound was deceptively simple: heavy beats mingled with brief flights of speed, wistful melodies, hypnotic washes of color from a thrumming Autoharp (that democratic, grade school dulcimer), and clever lyrics clothed in the taunting, indulgent rhymes of playground impromptus. No one who saw the Billy Nayer Show in its early days doubted it was going somewhere.

"That was why I first started wearing suits," songwriter and front man McAbee says. "I wanted to wear something that I'd be able to wear when I was old because I figured I'd probably still be doing it." He and Lurie have successfully grown their distinct undertaking through numerous personnel

eerie fellas carrying a box that, on first glance, would seem to contain major munitions but turns out to be a record player. The two men break into a Wild West square dance and "shoot" their mark – with a camera – as he sits on a toilet.

How it all adds up is never quite clear. The only thing you can truly be sure of by the end of Cory McAbee's retro-chic futuristic space western-film noir-rock opera is that knowledge is worthless. Watching the grimly comic 90 minutes of *The American Astronaut* is like being investigated for a crime you thought you only dreamed: by film's end, you're scratching your head wondering about a motive and checking under your seat for fingerprints.

The Billy Nayer Show, with McAbee at the mic, has developed a loyal cult following over the last decade by crushing language into its funniest idioms and most memorable clichés, reassembling his memories and yours into an absurd and amusing but generally nonsensical story. Words and phrases float on a sea of ellipses; the band's buoyancy has never seemed to match Earth's gravitational pull. Which is why space seems like its most natural next frontier.

Obsessions with childhood and adolescence, an adolescence that only

changes – McAbee estimates they've played with about 50 musicians over the years – as well as the vicissitudes of San Francisco's cultural life, where for more than a decade (until McAbee's recent relocation to New York) an extremely loyal following had clamored about the stage, gone to the screenings, framed and hung McAbee's objet d'art mailings, and awaited the arrival of *The American Astronaut*.

McAbee spoke with the *Bay Guardian* about *The American Astronaut*, the new film he wrote, directed, and stars in, as well as the arc of the Billy Nayer Show's first 12 years. In post-cold war fashion, that trajectory recently landed this American astronaut in – where else? – Moscow.

Bay Guardian: *Where did you discover the Autoharp?*

Cory McAbee: I discovered it when I was in high school, when I was about 16. My girlfriend was a preschool teacher, and she brought the preschool's Autoharp home, and I realized I could play it. It's usually played by preschool teachers, Sunday school priests, and hillbillies.

BG: *Were film, music, and animation all linked for you from the beginning?*

CM: Well, I drew. I mean, I've always loved music, like most teens and children, but I took a real interest in it. I just absorbed it constantly. That's why I got an Autoharp, so I could actually play something. I always drew

mutates – as opposed to matures – into adulthood, people an entire solar system. Photographed in an experimental black and white that's much more black than white, the film cleverly turns a low-budget SRO hotel room into an interplanetary spaceship and makes an outer space bar out of just a few tables and chairs. And the plot, it seems, is purely for show. The American astronaut's mission is simple, in a needlessly complicated sort of way – trade a cat for a cloned girl, whom he's to bring to a planet of men, in trade for the Boy Who Actually Saw a Woman's Breast, whom he's to bring to the planet of women, where he's to pick up the remains of Venus's love toy to bring back to Earth. The only problems are that the astronaut's being stalked by a crazy professor straight out of 1950s industrials, a sometime narrator with a bow-tie and birthday obsession, and he ends up picking up a space stray, a feral cat of a boy whose skittish behavior and rotten teeth are attributed to life in no gravity and a diet of tobacco, caffeine, and chocolate.

I wouldn't suggest adding it up. While *The American Astronaut*, as sentimental and perverse as the band that built it, touches down on the deeper wounds within the male psyche, from the shame of the anal

while growing up as well. There's a gentleman named David Tom, a painter out in San Francisco, and when we were 12 years old, we were friends and used to draw together. When I was about 20, he took me to College of Marin to take one course in drawing and composition. That's pretty much my education right there. The rest is self-taught.

stage to the anger of unrequited love, it's best to remember you're only along for the ride. A bucking-bronco robot, it's probably the wildest ride of the year.

Susan Gerhard

BG: *Is it the same with film?*

CM: The first film I did was "Billy Nayer," the animated short. When I first started the Billy Nayer Show, I started that simultaneously. I didn't know anything about animation. And so I made up my own process of doing it. I didn't know if it was going to work or not, and I spent about two and a half years painting 2,173 paintings. Lance Accord lived down the street. He was a cinematographer. And once I finished the paintings, he offered to shoot them for me. He also shot *Buffalo 66* and *Being John Malkovich*.

BG: *When did you decide to combine the two projects?*

CM: I was playing in different little incarnations with Bobby, our drummer and also my partner in BNS productions – he's the producer of all the films. We did something called the Billy Nayer Show once. It was all cover songs, and we decided to get serious. I would write songs, and we would play original music. And when we were putting the band together, I saw an animation festival and thought, "I too would like to have an animated short," because I was impressed. So it all kind of came about naturally.

BG: *It always seemed that BNS was a long-range concept.*

CM: Yeah, it was a long-range concept. That was why I first started wearing suits. I wanted to wear something that I'd be able to wear when I was old, because I figured I'd probably still be doing it. I wanted to look nice – like when Hank Williams went onstage, he'd put on a nice shirt – and I also wanted to look very basic. So wearing a suit – it became sort of popular during the swing revival, but for me it was a way of looking very standard. You know, looking like the man on the men's room sign. It was being a blank slate.

BG: *How did you support yourself along the way?*

CM: Mostly I worked in bars and nightclubs. And did odd jobs sometimes. I used to be the head of security at the Paradise Lounge. There and the Trocadero. I was also their MC. I would do their competitions, like the Bondage-A-Go-Go competitions. It was interesting. I did freelance artwork as well.

BG: *You call the film semiautobiographical. What about Professor Hess?*

CM: Professor Hess is the only character that wasn't inspired by people in my life. Professor Hess was somebody inspired by little incidences here and there, but not really birthed out of a relationship that I would have with anybody. He was an idea. When Rocco [Sisto] came in to try out for the part – he was just so unusual, he actually scared the hell out of me. He was more than I was expecting.

BG: *What do you think of the David Lynch comparisons?*

CM: Well, people make a lot of different comparisons all the time. It's how people speak these days. The David Lynch one, I think, is not trying hard enough. *Eraserhead* was high-contrast black and white with a lot of dark; so is our black-and-white space movie. That doesn't mean that they're similar films at all. Some comparisons I really enjoy. The first people we showed it to were some Frenchmen, and after they saw it, they go, "Eeet iz Samuel Beckett!" And the guy at the *New York Times* just wrote that it's Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, and Ed Wood.

BG: *There's a particular adolescent worldview functioning in your work.*

CM: I don't know if that's true of all of our work, but that is most definitely true of *The American Astronaut*. I think there's an honesty and a directness which sometimes gets seen as almost a naive approach, but in *The American Astronaut* the sexuality of the entire universe is like a grown-up version of what happens in junior high. It's like boys on one side of the room and girls on the other side – it's dance.

BG: *There seems to be an attraction and a fear of America that comes across in the film. How do you feel about those roughnecks and cowboys in your films?*

CM: Everybody's experience is different. Even my own in S.F. There were times when I had hundreds of friends and was having the time of my life and times when I was all by myself. No matter where you go, it depends on individual experience and a lot of things. But as far as the silver miners from Nevada

go, when you see our miner, floating around, this weird deformed guy, he's kind of frightening. But Samuel Curtis, he's totally busting up with the guy. The idea behind it was, when you're a little kid, and you go into some weird town, and some weird, strange-looking old man comes up to you and your father, and he goes, "Look at that little boy! Look at his hair – he looks like a girl!" And you're sitting there going, "Whaaaaaaaaat?????!!!" And your dad's kind of laughing and going, "Yeah, he kind of does." And you're like, "What's going on?," because you can't relate. You don't know why your dad isn't reacting with horror or shock as you are. But it's just some old guy messing with you. And the fact that he's strange-looking, he's just old. And that's what the silver miners were.

BG: *How's the move to NYC been treating you?*

CM: Good. I just moved out here about six months ago. One thing that made me feel very connected with New York was, about six o'clock in the morning I would get up and go out with chalk and charcoals, do large drawings on the sidewalks of the actors in the film, and write the information for the film next to them. While I would be doing it, people would come by and talk to me and hang out. I did 25 of them. Doing that was much more exciting than seeing a poster. I did it before in S.F. when I didn't have any money. I would do big pictures of Hank Williams and Peter Lorre, different people, around Market and Third. One of my survival skills that I brought with me and used as advertisement – my own billboards.

BG: *You went to Russia with the film recently. How did they like it in Moscow?*

CM: They loved it, although the Hertz Donut joke went over like a lead balloon. There was no interpretation for that – "How would you like a painful pastry?"

BG: *I see.*

CM: It was my first time out of the country, really, and I went there all by myself.

BG: *Not speaking a word of Russian?*

CM: Not speaking a word of Russian. In fact, I went to their opening ceremony, and they wouldn't let me in because I wasn't wearing a jacket. I didn't know I was supposed to, and finally through hand gestures I figured it out. So I went to leave these barricades that were set up for celebrities, and some kid on the street gave me his jacket. It was huge, with big shoulder pads and no collar. So I put it on, and I went back in.

The sleeves went down past my fingers. I bent my arms so it didn't look so big, and I went, "How's this?" I'm walking between these barricades along a blue carpet, and there's a military band playing and all these guards standing all over the place, and on one side is the press taking photographs, and on the other side are the people, and as I walk up, they all start applauding. I kind of smiled, and they went nuts. Women were blowing me kisses. Finally, when I was going to leave, I was standing in line for customs for hours, and there was a girl standing next to me. And the guy wouldn't let me leave because I didn't have my prints with me, and it said in my paperwork that I have to have them. So she says to him in Russian, "You have to let him go; he's a famous filmmaker from America." And the guy says, "Yes, I know. I saw him on television."

BG: *This was your first time out of the country?*

CM: Well, I went to Tijuana once and bought a cowboy hat. And they put me up right next to Red Square. I went into the Kremlin, too. It was great. There were a bunch of guards blowing whistles and chasing me around.

'The American Astronaut' opens Fri/2, Lumiere Theatre, 1572 California, S.F. (415) 352-0810.

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