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MUSIC

'Neon Highway' film celebrates country's captivating artiststry, songwriting

Artists, actors, creators, producers attached to new film "Neon Highway" discuss the film's multi-generational impact



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Published 5:08 a.m. CT March 13, 2024 | Updated 5:08 a.m. CT March 13, 2024

Via many passionate creators and award-winning classic country fanatics, the new film "Neon Highway" revives Johnny Cash's legacy and the power of songwriting in equal measure.

Between producing the 80s cult classic "They Live" and the third installment of the "Mission Impossible" film franchise in 2003 (among over 60 credits in 50 years), former Paramount Pictures executive vice president Stratton Leopold aspired to have Cash star in the film that 30 years later, will be released on Mar. 15, 2024, as "Neon Highway."

Had it been released almost four decades ago, it'd have cut very close to the reality of The Man In Black's career in the space between 1986-1990 where, after releasing a top-ten album for Columbia Records every year for almost 30 years, he was dropped by the label in 1986.

Country music's pop revival makes film relevant over generations

Leopold noted that after 1996, though still successful, domestic film audiences wanted more than the nearly \$1 billion gross by action films representing 25 percent of that year's top 10 overall grossing movies.

In his mind, a year like 1969, wherein a trio of Western-style films — "Butch Cassidy and

the Sundance Kid," "Paint Your Wagon" and "True Grit" (the latter two of the three, released by Paramount) — had success similar to action films in the late 1990s, was worthy of attention.

Leopold tells *The Tennessean* that he "enjoyed" initially meeting and working with Johnny Cash and Andy Griffith on the film "Murder in Coweta County" in 1983.

Cash's critical revival via his first two "American Recordings" albums, coinciding with acts like Alan Jackson, who had heightened pop cultural visibility due to their country music stardom, inspired the initial "Neon Highway" script.

Country music's revival in popularity worldwide reawakened Leopold's investment in "authentic" films like what "Neon Highway" represents.

A classic plot

Instead of Cash, Emmy, Golden Globe, and Grammy-winning actor Beau Bridges plays Claude Allen, a country music performer now away from Nashville (the film was shot in Atlanta). He meets Wayne Collins (played in the movie by currently Nashville-based actor/singer Rob Mayes).

To Leopold, Bridges, like Cash, is as "lovely and amazing as a man as he is an actor." He adds that Mayes' abilities as a country musician and live performer added "excitement" to the film overall.

Collins is working a blue-collar existence after a car accident that derailed his dreams of Nashville success. For the still-aspiring artist, meeting Allen rekindles his ambitions. They pair, and on the strength of one of the former's songs (the film's title song, written by 23-time country chart-topper Dallas Davidson), they return to Music City.

However, akin to Cash's career at the turn of the 1990s, mainstream country music industry interest in Bridges' character Allen has waned. Now motivated by his success and Allen's legacy, Mayes' character Collins works to make "The Neon Highway" an independent success.

A legend reflects

Beau Bridges, 82, has been a lifelong country music fan and guitarist since his early 20s.

He found leveling up his work to fill shoes originally meant for Johnny Cash to be one of his career's most "dauntingly thrilling" challenges.

An era where Cash broke out with "I Walk The Line" was when he initially picked up a hollow-bodied Danelectro guitar and became familiar with the then blues-based and rock and roll-standard E-A-B7 chord progression.

"'Neon Highway' tells an important story of how the best lives are those always lived with purpose," says Bridges to The Tennessean.

"['Neon Highway'] also enhanced my appreciation for the dedication required to achieve the great careers of the many artists I know in [country music's] industry."

As time passed, Bridges' musical interests expanded. "Neon Highway" found him working with Grammy-winning and critically acclaimed Latin jazz legend and composer Arturo Sandoval, another of his all-time favorites.

Bridges had an on-again and off-again relationship with penning country songs, sometimes alongside Sandoval.

Acting in the film also allowed Bridges to visit Nashville and see his Grammy-winning songwriter friend John Goodwin, who had worked on "The Weary Kind" for Bridges' brother Jeff's starring role in the 2009 film Crazy Heart.

For "Neon Highway," Goodwin contributes a song that Bridges performs in the film.

Vulnerable truths revealed

For seasoned actor and Cleveland-born country performer Mayes, playing Wayne Collins is a role where the double impact of a legendary actor portraying a role intended for a Country Music Hall of Famer leaves him still astounded.

"Assuming that role was like facing a mirror into myself and the future I aspire to have," he tells The Tennessean.

"The best country music, like acting, is always about the vulnerability required to face the human components involved in living our truths."

For Mayes, the power of manifestation and the celebration of a tale of redemption highlight the film's best pathways to connectivity for viewers.

He also finds it "refreshing" that a film with four decades of legacy attached to it has been released during an era where many dynamic trends are exploding in popularity alongside country music's longstanding norms.

For as much as stars seem to be rising unexpectedly, Mayes believes that for those for whom stardom is still a hope, the film's story of "underdogs achieving redemption" can serve as a beacon.

Nashville stars in cast discuss film's impact

Five years ago, Brice, portraying a wedding singer, performed Elvis Presley's "Can't Help Falling In Love" during the Hallmark film "Wedding At Graceland," starring Kellie Pickler. As far as Tillis is concerned, she appeared on the popular program "Nashville" between 2013 and 2018.

For Brice, the silver screen dauntingly increases the reach and scale of his art. The country radio chart-topper and Academy of Country Music Award-winner's work alongside a more seasoned actor in fellow country artist Mayes has inspired a desire to include more film appearances in his still-busy schedule as an artist and songwriter.

Second-generation country star Tillis (she's the oldest of Country Music Hall of Famer Mel Tillis' five children) offers that the "heightened realities" provided by both the screen and stage offer strong similarities between the arts of film and music.

Tillis' cameo as herself is notable to the film's supposed timeline. When Columbia Records dropped Cash, the Academy of Country Music nominated Tillis as 1986's "Top New Female Vocalist."

When asked about the film's impact, the profoundness of Cash's legacy and the role he was initially cast to play being played by Bridges resonates with Tillis.

"There are consummate actors who, like the great performers, are so captivating that they embody the standard of their craft," she says, following her statement with a smile.

"Heck, even my father thought Johnny Cash was cooler than he was — and he didn't say that about many people."

"People are flawed and country music is unafraid of celebrating difficult human interest stories," says Mayes. "Whether I'm an actor playing a country star or a country artist

working as an actor when art successfully impacts people, my job is done."