

Program Title: My Prairie Home
Program Subject(s) Gender Identity; Transgenderism; Folk Music
Year Produced: 2013
Directed by Chelsea McMullan
Produced by Lea Marin
Distributed by National Film Board of Canada / Office National Du Film Du Canada
Reviewed by Timothy Hackman, University of Maryland
Running Time 77 minutes
Color or B&W Color
Awards Received Winner, Best Documentary, Vancouver Critics Circle
Nominee, Best Feature Documentary, Canadian Screen Award
Audience Level General Adult
Review

We open on a truck stop restaurant, somewhere in rural North America. The walls are painted pink and are adorned with a variety of kitschy décor, including a print of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*, a gloomy painting of Jesus watching over a truck driver, another painting of a semi at sunset with light bulbs embedded in the picture. Waitresses dressed in pinkish purple scrubs circulate, filling coffee at booths upholstered in Route 66-themed fabric. The customers are mostly men, predominately overweight, a high proportion dressed in at least one article of denim clothing. At the counter, a person in a checked shirt, a guitar slung across one shoulder, sits on a stool, back to the camera. What appears to be a slim young man, with short hair and Buddy Holly glasses, turns around to face the camera, rises, takes the guitar, and begins to sing in a voice that is high, clear, beautiful, and distinctly feminine. The singer strolls through the diner, strumming and singing. Most of the customers ignore the performance, going on with their conversations and breakfasts; others cast a wary eye, perhaps worried that the singer will pass the hat for donations. The singer strolls to the back of the diner, where they pause in front of the restrooms – men's and women's doors painted nursery blue and pink, respectively – before returning to the counter, finishing the song, and once again taking a seat, back to the camera. The restaurant patrons continue to butter their toast, eat their eggs, and drink their coffee.

The singer is Rae Spoon, a singer-songwriter from Calgary, Canada. *My Prairie Home* follows Spoon (who is transgender and prefers the gender-neutral pronouns) as they travel around non-descript rural locales, sometimes performing but often just talking, in bus stations, hotel rooms, at their home, and in the studio, about their childhood, the struggles of growing up transgender in a strict Christian household, and about the challenges of living as a transgender person, especially one whose work requires them to travel, often alone and through rural areas where fluidity of gender is not looked upon favorably.

Restrooms, for example, appear as a key site of tension throughout the film (as indeed they do in real life for many transgender people.) In one scene, Spoon's guitar case and bags are piled outside of truck stop restrooms, positioned roughly halfway between the men's and women's doors. The camera lingers on both doors, and the musician's belongings, until Spoon finally appears from the women's room. In another scene, the camera holds a long shot of two gas station restrooms until at last Spoon emerges, with a hint of a satisfied smile, from the men's room.

Spoon's 2013 album, also entitled *My Prairie Home*, serves as soundtrack and score to the film. Their music is simple but beautiful, the lyrics eloquent and personal. The song "Sunday Dress," which we see Spoon recording in a home studio, begins: "When I was a little girl / I thought I had to hold up the world / Singing hallelujah in the choir / to keep my feet out of the fire / My prairie home / My prairie home / My prairie home / fits like a Sunday dress."

The film also uses a series of clever music videos to elaborate on its themes and to tell the artist's story. In one sequence, for example, the singer discusses their father, whose mental health issues were compounded by a particularly virulent strain of evangelical Christianity and who forbade his children to learn about or play with toys of dinosaurs because they were "non-Biblical" creatures. That reminiscence is followed by a video for a song called "This Used to Be the Bottom of an Ocean," set in the hall of dinosaurs at a natural history museum. The dinosaurs in the background underline the singer's own experience as a transgender person, a "creature who may or may not exist," in Spoon's words. Another story about a first girlfriend is followed by a video for a song called "Love Is a Hunter," in which people wearing giant deer masks twirl in a field and eventually fall down, slain by love.

The pace of the film is contemplative, with lots of long shots of prairie fields and swirling birds illustrating the tedium of life on the road. Likewise, the stories that Spoon tells are deliberate and unhurried. They fit together to tell one person's experience with the ways in which gender identity is discovered, constructed, and deconstructed. The best parts of the film, though, are the musical performances. The creativity in the music's presentation, and Spoon's obvious musical talent, make this film **Recommended**.

Reviewer Rating

Recommended