

Southern culture sure ain't on the skids



Race relations have always been an important theme in Southern films, such as in 'Mississippi Masala,' above.

Dixie behind many of Hollywood's finest films; race relations remains powerful theme in works

"There was a land of Cavaliers and cotton fields called the Old South ... Here in this patrician world the Age of Chivalry took its last bow ... Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair, of Master and of Slave."
—Gone With the Wind, 1939

From Uncle Tom's Cabin to Fried Green Tomatoes, American movies have enjoyed a steady romance with the South.

Is there another part of the country that has inspired more movies? The West, perhaps. But except for such rarities as Dances With Wolves and Silverado, the Western has disappeared as a film staple.

The latest example of the South's appeal is Fried Green Tomatoes, a two-generation comedy-drama that has shown amazing staying power since its release in December. Kathy Bates, who stars in the film with Jessica Tandy, muses on why the South has produced so many movies:

"If I had to say why I think it is so, I think it has to do with the fact that Southerners are such great storytellers: Margaret Mitchell, of course. Horton Foote, Eudora Welty, and on and on and on, plus the fact that back up in the Appalachian hills they tell stories from generation to generation.

"There's a picturesque quality to the South. Some parts of it appear not to have forgotten the Civil War. I went home last summer to Memphis, my hometown. There's a different pace there. Seeing the Mississippi brought a tear to my eye. I like that place."

Although born in London, Miss Tandy has created three memorable Southern ladies. She was the original Blanche DuBois opposite Marlon Brando in the Broadway version of A Streetcar Named Desire, and won a Tony award for her performance. Two years ago she won the Academy Award as best actress for her role as the aging matron in Driving Miss Daisy.

"Those roles keep coming my way, and I'm glad they do," she says. "They were all from completely different backgrounds. Blanche was an entirely different character from Miss Daisy, for instance, also of a different time.

"Miss Daisy comes from a completely different background from Ninny (Fried Green Tomatoes). Ninny comes from a tiny little place called Whistle Stop; the very name lets you know that it is a very small community. Miss Daisy came from Atlanta and was in very different circumstances. They both are quite feisty ladies, very much alive and interested in life.

"Ninny I particularly loved because she has really nothing, but is such a positive character. She's an entertainer, a storyteller, she's not content to sit back and be in a rocking chair."

Denzel Washington stars in another current movie about the South, Mississippi Masala, which concerns the bigotry involved when a black American and an eastern Indian woman fall in love.

His off-the-cuff response to the large number of Southern movies: "It's cheaper to shoot there," referring to the fact that producers can cut costs by

filming in states with right-to-work laws.

Washington adds: "Maybe we're still reflecting on what we've done. The South is still a laboratory (for race relations)."

Others have observed that the South was on the losing side of the nation's greatest drama, the Civil War, and the tragedy of that great conflict is more dramatic for the vanquished. Also the matter of white-black relationships, another great national drama, has continued from colonial times to the present day.

Much of The Prince of Tides is set on the South Carolina coast and deals with the Southern gothic theme of a dysfunctional family. Cape Fear also is set in North Carolina and paints a horrific picture of a psychotic poor white Southerner.

Dixie provided film material as early as 1903 with the first of six silent ver-



sions of Uncle Tom's Cabin. D.W. Griffith's 1916 epic Birth of a Nation, which portrayed the Southern side of the Civil War, became the most successful film of its era. It also was the most controversial, because of its portrayal of blacks and its championing of the Ku Klux Klan.

The talkies brought all-black films such as Hearts in Dixie and King Vidor's Hallelujah, but their

portrayals typified the stereotypes that would continue for decades.

Race relations provided strong drama, especially in the post-World War II era. Examples: Intruder in the Dust, The Defiant Ones, A Soldier's Story and Mississippi Burning.

There's something about family relationships that provide strong Southern dramas. The Little Foxes is based on the Lillian Hellman play about an unhappy family who scheme against one another during Reconstruction; Another Part of the Forest is almost a prequel to The Little Foxes; Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is the Tennessee Williams' melodrama of a dying patriarch and his two disappointing sons; The Sound and the Fury shows William Faulkner's dying South; Tobacco Road is about a family of poor whites in Georgia.

Many Southern films are based on the works of Southern fiction writers. Deliverance, John Boorman's horrific look at male bonding, was based on the novel by James Dickey. The Yearling, about a boy's attachment to a deer, was based on the classic by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, who left the Northeast to live and write in the South.

The Member of the Wedding is Carson McCullers' play and novel about an adolescent girl. And Summer and Smoke, the story of an unmarried woman's unrequited love, was based on another Tennessee Williams' play. Acclaimed author Pat Conroy has received an Oscar nomination with Becky Johnston for the screenplay adaptation of his novel, The Prince of Tides.

But Gone With the Wind, based on the Margaret Mitchell book, remains the most popular film treatment of the American South, and audiences continue to share the emotional tension between unforgettable characters struggling to survive war and love and change.

—Associated Press



The now-defunct Pressure Boys, the forerunners of such local favorites as the Sex Police and Johnny Quest

South remains mecca for progressive pop

CHARLES MARSHALL
Staff Writer

Progressive rock in the South has been through some pretty amazing trends in the past 10 years, and many of them have been pioneered right here in Chapel Hill.

As the alternative underground clamor that used to be reserved for New York clubs and California hideaways now begins to ooze into the mainstream media and make a dent in sales (Billboard, MTV, Rolling Stone), more national attention than ever before becomes focused on the southern part of heaven.

"I put a stake in your spikes/And you better laugh at my jokes ..."

—Superchunk
While Nirvana, Soundgarden, Pixies and Sonic Youth have been gracing as first-generation corporate alternative rock, it's no wonder local bands like Superchunk and Polvo are making it less as regional bands and more as siblings to a new national wave of raunchy, cutting-edge alternative rock bands.

As more major labels enter the fray, more attention will be faced on Chapel Hill bands, especially now that they've been packaged and organized more consistently and attractively by thriving indie labels, a well-rounded club scene and all the media hype centered on such an active bastion of urban progressive culture.

The new wave of noisy, bitter, garage-tuned bands have a local spirit, but they also have a tight, more exclusive cultish audience and boast the potential to break the confines of the traditional Chapel Hill music scene that existed in the late '80s.

Without using the dreaded "J" word, it's almost hard to recover the lost spirit of Chapel Hill and other southern college towns in the late '80s college pop scene.

But for a while, after the improbable ascension of R.E.M. into the national spotlight, Southern college pop took on a catchy twang of tuneful electric guitar pop, homely enough to soothe the disillusioned youth and preppy

frat-types, but with a do-it-yourself, rootsy attitude in a cranky club atmosphere that also satiated the discriminating local music lover and college radio personnel.

"Time goes in instants/In fits and starts/I can't see the future from where we are/and it's some golden age/I'm still afraid to touch ..."

—Let's Active
Plain and simple, underneath the scraggly, J Mascis-looking youth behind the guitars of Satellite Boyfriend, Eight or Nine Feet, the Popes, Swamis, Light in August, Snatches of Pink, Chapter Two and all the other bands I left out, were sweet-toothed pop bands. They caught you with hearty hooks, meaty rhythms, and anything from Mummer-era minimalist guitar riffs to loud, pompous metallic surges. They sang songs about Franklin Street, about college girls, about politics, about themselves and practically all the other pop standbys.

All of the above says that while the underground music scene has drifted away from the pure pop sound, its influence on the local music network and community is undeniable.

"So you like what I'm doing/Your girlfriend likes what I'm doing/This ain't no time to quit now."

—the Popes

Indeed, it wasn't time to quit. Even when the demise of the big pop bands on a national level (Guadalcanal Diary, Love Tractor, dB's), Chapel Hill, led by the prep-punk-pop appeal of the Connells and Pressure Boys, had created a thriving small-time music mecca whose low-budget woes but high-hearted musical spirits fed off each other.

Area bands became a permanent fixture in the whole community, due to the down-home, common appeal of the players and the real accessibility in the music. Fraternity parties supported lots of local music, most notably giving now-successful bands like Johnny Quest, Dillon Fence and the Popes some of their earliest sources of support and exposure. Campus-wide events, coffeeshops, Cat's Cradle and other

Triangle venues also supported these bands in a wide variety of events.

The national attention shifted away from the content, casual and noncommittal pop of the South, opting instead for a more "urban-edged" northern slate of bands (Smithereens, BoDeans, 10,000 Maniacs) who were less regional but benefited from more highly populated areas and established music scenes.

But Southern progressive pop had created its own scene. Though it was hard to keep afloat at times, it gave local fans more than their share of great music. Many local junkies still swear by Let's Active and think the Veldt's album (whenever it comes out) will be the biggest thing yet. Besides, Pressure Boys covers still pop up on local music compilations.

While you can still catch glimpses of Chapter Two in What Peggy Wants, Pressure Boys in Sex Police and Bad Checks in Dillon Fence, the explosion of Triangle bands in the late '80s was one that absorbed the entire community and gave the jumpstart for the growing, more narrow underground attack that has begun in Orange County basements and is turning industry heads in New York City.

"And if it crumbles all around us, then we'll wait and see"

—The Connells

Things haven't crumbled yet for Raleigh's hottest and most consistent college band, but many of these bands can't be starving indie faves forever. With the then-tiny but developing Mammoth Records as the only true local label, and with media attention shifting away from kudzu-rock and focusing instead on the West coast and on the funk-metal phenom, many of the band's aging necessities and big-label hopes were indeed and unfortunately crumbling.

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"And now we are grown/Can we find our way back?"

—Chapter Two

Alabama — the final frontier for New Yorker in 'My Cousin Vinny'

My Cousin Vinny

Joe Pesci, Ralph Macchio, Fred Gwynne, Marisa Tomei

directed by Jonathan Lynn

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Even though we all like to think of ourselves as Americans, our country is chock full of many diverse cultures. As these cultures come together, some funny and strange things can happen. As students here at Carolina, the phenomenon of North meeting South is very familiar. Considering the stereotypes that each group has about the other, things can get strange. This intersection of two completely different worlds is the most interesting part of the new film My Cousin Vinny.

As the film opens, we meet Bill (Ralph Macchio) and Stan (Mitchell Whitfield), two New York University students who are transferring to UCLA. They have decided to drive from New York to Los Angeles by the southern route. They stop at a convenience store in Alabama to pick up supplies and Bill accidentally walks out with a can of tuna. As they hit the road again, they are pulled over by a policeman and taken in.

Thinking they've been arrested for shoplifting, they immediately confess. Instead, they're being charged with murdering the clerk at the convenience store.

MIKE LONG
Movie

In desperation, Bill calls home for help. His mother tells him that they're sending Bill's cousin Vinny, a lawyer. Vincent LaGuardia Gambini (Joe Pesci) and his fiancée Mona Lisa Vito (Marisa Tomei) (Are those great stereotypical Italian names or what?) arrive in town and things get wild.

Vinny and Lisa are both pure-bred Brooklyn-ites, and the South is like another planet to them. Vinny assures the boys that he will get them out. He meets the judge (Fred Gwynne), and realizes that things are going to be tougher than he suspected. You see, this is Vinny's first case.

While the trial angle dominates the

... It's nice to see Southerners treated like real people and not rejects from Hee-Haw ...

movie, the scenes in which Vinny tries grits, get woken up by mill whistles, pigs, trains and owls, fights off rednecks and meets Alabama mud are truly hilarious. Here we have Vinny in his leather blazer, using the F-word every other second, landing in the middle of an episode of Green Acres. Fortunately, Southerners are treated with dignity and respect in this film. Sure, there are the stereotypical rednecks, but the Judge has a Yale education. It's nice to

see Southerners treated like real people and not rejects from Hee-Haw.

The trial is interesting, but things get a bit unrealistic. When Vinny first enters the courtroom, he is unsure of himself and does everything wrong. He is charged with contempt of court several times. As the trial comes to its crucial point, Vinny suddenly becomes super-lawyer. He is pulling facts out of the air and confusing all of the witnesses with his witty cross-examination. It's really hard to swallow this sudden change in character.

Joe Pesci steals the show as Vinny. He is the penultimate smooth Italian guy. His accent, manner and dress make his performance even more convincing. Marisa Tomei is a true find as Lisa. Her energy flows from the screen as she tries to love Vinny and keep him out of jail. Ralph Macchio has a very small part and contributes little to the film. Fred Gwynne (Pet Semetary) plays the stern judge.

In most comedies, the director just sets up the camera and lets the actors do their thing. Well, I don't know if Jonathan Lynn was bored or enthusiastic, but he puts a lot of cool angles into his shots, such as shooting scenes from above the action or from under desks. It's nice to see someone breaking up the monotony of the average Hollywood comedy.

As a comedy, My Cousin Vinny works. It's great to see Joe Pesci strut his stuff in the part he was born to play. While there are some clever parts to the courtroom scenes, "Vinny discovers the South" is the best part of the film. My advice, grab a Yankee and go share the warmth of this film.



Gene Hackman and Willem DaFoe starred in 1988's 'Mississippi Burning,' a drama tackling the problem of racial violence in the South during the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s