

His soul is in his songs

Bridges garners Oscar buzz for 'Crazy Heart'

By **DAVID GERMAIN**
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In some not too far-fetched parallel universe, Jeff Bridges really might be living the life of a boozy country singer.

Bridges seems like the real thing in "Crazy Heart," rasping out songs in the comfortable remnants of a whiskey-and-tobacco-seared voice that you might swear you've heard on a hundred jukeboxes in a hundred anonymous roadhouses.

It's not a great singing voice, but it's a soulful one, and Bridges matches it with one of the finest performances of his career, just playing the hell out of this guy whose self-abuse has carried him to a precipice where he either leaps into the pit or turns back and cleans up.

Academy Awards buzz is swirling around Bridges, nominated four times previously without a win. "Crazy Heart" feels like a potential Oscar winner for Bridges, who has a nice good-luck charm tagging along in co-star Robert Duvall, the best-actor winner for 1983's "Tender Mercies," another story of a downtrodden country singer.

Adapted by first-time director Scott Cooper from Thomas Cobb's novel, the film casts Bridges as Bad Blake, an apt name for this wreck of a musician who has spoiled his many marriages, his career, his liver and lungs – pretty much everything a man can ruin.

He's not black-hearted bad – he's actually quite a charmer and very funny when he doesn't let his ornery side overwhelm things. But he is bad – bad for himself and bad for others – and life has handed him more than his share of bad breaks.

Bad's still chugging through the heartland in his behemoth of a 1970s SUV, playing in dive bars and bowling alleys with pickup bands from town to town. His audiences are small but adoring, even when he's so drunk he has to dart offstage to throw up in a trash can in a back alley, leaving the backup musicians to perform the song he's just dedicated to a wide-eyed fan.

The man's had a taste of success, but nothing like the superstardom of his old protégé Tommy Sweet (Colin Farrell), who has scored mega-hits recording some of the tunes Bad has written.

Accustomed to one-night stands,



LOREY SEBASTIAN

Jeff Bridges stars as down-and-out country singer Bad Blake.



CRAZY HEART 111 minutes, R

(for language and brief sexuality)

Directed and written by Scott Cooper, based on the novel by Thomas Cobb. Produced by T-Bone Burnett, Judy Cairo, Rob Carliner, Scott Cooper and Robert Duvall. Photographed by Barry Markowitz. Edited by John Axelrad. Music by Stephen Bruton and T-Bone Burnett. With Jeff Bridges, Robert Duvall, Colin Farrell and Maggie Gyllenhaal. Playing in Manhattan at the Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St. and the AMC Lincoln Square 13, 1998 Broadway.

Bad finds himself in a family frame of mind when he falls for Jean Craddock (Maggie Gyllenhaal), a single mom and small-town journalist who interviews him while he's on the road.

Despite their age difference, Bridges and Gyllenhaal ease into romance naturally and believably, the relationship sparkling in the good times and truly agonizing in the bad.

Like Bridges' Dude in "The Big Lebowski," Bad abides, his resilience his second strongest suit next to his sheer devotion to making music. With a little help from

his bar owner pal Wayne (Duvall), Bad takes some first steps at getting clean and sober.

Bridges is so good that you love this guy even when he is bad, even when he messes up. You're not sure he'll make it, but you befriend him from the start, and all you can do is root for him and hope things turn out well.

The story has its little clichés, yet it never succumbs to them, maintaining a sense of the unexpected and uncertain in the reclamation project Bad is making of his life.

Cooper, who has appeared in several films with Duvall, makes an assured filmmaking debut, doing what good actors-turned-directors do – staying out of the way of their performers and letting them run.

The real behind-the-scenes stars are T Bone Burnett, also a producer on "Crazy Heart," and his song-writing collaborator Stephen Bruton, who died of cancer last spring as production was wrapping on the film.

Burnett, the mastermind behind the "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" soundtrack, and Bruton craft memorable songs that sound as though they were real country hits for somebody, particularly on the nice word play and catchy chorus of a tune titled "Fallin' & Flyin'."

The songs become anthems inhabited by Bridges, whose Bad Blake may wish his life had turned out differently but is never going to dribble tears in his shot glass so long as he still can find a stage somewhere to belt out a tune.