

Young is Restless

By John Payne,
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Neil Young's is the veteran rock man's third ramble into the realm of film as director "Bernard Shakey." The low-budget *Greendale*, shot and scored entirely by Young himself, tells the tale of the tight-knit but unraveling Green family, who live in a small town somewhere in rural America.

The *Greendale* project has been presented in several forms and opens as a movie this week. Each facet of the "mosaic," as Young calls it, contains elements not found in the others, so if you really want to know what's going on in Greendale, you'll need to experience it in more ways than one. But even then you might not get the whole picture. That's because Young himself doesn't know what *Greendale* represents – he's making the thing up as he goes along, and he's as curious as you are about how it's going to end.

Young grew up in Toronto. His father was a writer. One day Young asked his father what he was going to write, and his father said that he wouldn't know until he'd finished writing it. Young's similar, intuitive approach to developing the Greendale story isn't all that different from the way he has always developed his ideas, which is by feeling his way into things; he uses his emotional reactions as his guide. "That's the way I like to do it," he says. "It doesn't always work that way, but most of the time."

L.A. WEEKLY: *Greendale* is, in part, about corruption, a corruption that's both micro and macro, back and forth, between small-town life, family life, and the world at large – big business and government, environmental disasters, religious wars. You seem to say that corruption begins at home, but that the fish rots from the head down.

NEIL YOUNG: I think a lot of people feel that way. It's pretty obvious that something's happening. The fact is that things happen that seem to be covered up, but you can see right through it. People don't trust the information they're getting because it looks like it came out of Madison Avenue, or something selling the war, selling this and that. Everything looks like a commercial – they get up there and talk about how they're saving trees by taking some of the trees out so that the other ones can be safe from fire, and when Joe Blow on the street reads it, he thinks, "Oh great, they're saving the forests" or whatever. And then you go, "But I know what's going on, I *think* I know what's going on, I think it's a payoff to the lumber industry." You're being told that they're going to revitalize the economy by selling out the wilderness. You know, whatever you're going to do has a business-corporate kind of an angle to it, and it's being sold as something else to Joe Blow on the street. On the other hand, there's all these other people who are going, "Yeah, what a great idea, we're going to save the forest and we're gonna make money at the same time, we're gonna fix the economy, this is great."

Was there a specific incident that triggered the impulse to make this film? Did the war in Iraq enter into it, or something of that nature?

No, we're talking mostly about human things, about things that are more personal. My father-in-law passed away a couple of years ago, and my son was married on the same day, and you know, I really loved my father-in-law and, obviously, love my son, so there was something happening there that just got some kind of thing going. And then shortly after that, in August of 2002, I started recording *Greendale*. But I didn't know it was *Greendale* at the time. We had decided we were going to get together and write some songs and record them, just like we always do. So I wrote one song and recorded it, and then I finished another one and we recorded that, and after the third one it was obvious that there was a story and there were characters, which was different – I'd had songs with stories and characters in them before, but I'd never had a series of songs where they continue like chapters. And I could see that developing.

But I didn't know where we were going. The first song I wrote was "Devil's Sidewalk," which describes the town, and it's really like a travelogue of Greendale. But I didn't *know* it was Greendale. Then I went on with "Falling From Above," which is the first song on the record, and then "Double E," which is the second song on the album. You know, I record the songs as I write them, so one day I'd write a song and then we'd record it, and then maybe that night or the next day we'd mix it, and then I come in the next day, and I've written another song. So it kinda unfolded that way.

Do you see *Greendale* as a collective fantasy that we all might have about small-town life? Or is it based more on your own background?

It's based on a family, and it's just any town – this town happens to be a coastal town in the USA, probably in California. And it has to do with just one family that doesn't even live in town. They live outside of town, although one character, Sun Green, goes to school in town. So it's the Greendale experience, basically, with all these characters. All I did was fill in the characters as I thought they were, you know, and I just went along. I wasn't trying to create anything political. But these *are* my views, and these were things that I was seeing, and when I get inside Grandpa's head, I'm like, you know, "This is screwed up," you know, "Everything that I thought that America stood for is being dismantled here." He's reading about all these things in the newspaper and seeing them on TV and freaking out. So his life takes quite a twist.

Grandpa is the core of conscience in the film. Obviously people are going to say he's in some sense you.

Yeah, and I have a character with Sun Green who is completely idealistic, although she's realistic in some ways, and very calculating in some ways. So I can take that on too, but that's Sun Green. It doesn't have to be Neil Young. All of these characters give me a lot more freedom to express all the different parts of things than my previous records, which were very personal, one-on-one kinda records. *Greendale* is almost like I've abandoned that completely and moved it into a bunch of people and made it family.

You portray the bucolic aspects of small-town life, and this idealized family, then slowly reveal the dark underside of such a life. As I watched this film, I thought of David Lynch, someone who's way beyond irony – he believes in what he's expressing about a more innocent way of life, but recognizes that it just can't be, and probably never was. As your story unfolded, were you aware of this sort of viewpoint creeping in?

Well, it's funny, when we took the film to Europe in April last year, these people come in and they have all of these questions about the *politics*, and the *underlying sensibilities* of all of these things, and I realized, "What's going on here?" I was really happy that people are asking me these questions, but it was almost like I was learning about the film by the questions people were asking. The characters and their development just kinda oozed out. The people in Europe, they're looking at me like, "This is really what rural America is like? Are people in rural America really that out of touch with reality?" And I'm going, "I don't know. I'm not sure if they are or if they aren't."

You made the film with an old 8mm camera – and much of it's hand-held. It's interesting how the shakiness, or when you've got some fuzz on the lens . . . you adjust after a while, it becomes a nonissue.

Right. That's the medium – it's a funky view.

So about 10 minutes into it, "It is what it is."

I didn't make it to be a film, I made it to develop a record, and it was just like, we just threw it together 'cause we didn't want to spend a lot of money – it's not worth it. There was nothing about the film that demanded we spend a lot of money on it. The cheaper it was, and the faster it was and the dirtier it was, the better it was. That was our theme.

Were you very hands-on in postproduction as well?

Pretty much, yeah. I worked with the editor. But the structure was there already, so it was really just a matter of choosing the angles that seemed to convey the feelings the best.

Were there any whole scenes that you discarded?

Well, we couldn't discard anything, because the songs already existed, and we just built around them, and they were in a certain order, so there was nothing to think about there. The music was always playing while we were shooting.

You surprised people by supporting Reagan back in the '80s, or by expressing sympathy with some of Reagan's policies. And now you seem to be a very anti-Bush guy. And you seem to be largely – in fact, entirely – concerned with individual beliefs, personal freedoms. But obviously, many expect you to toe some kind of party line.

What happens to me is, whenever anybody gets elected to office, my first inclination is to get behind them, because they're in a position to win, to do something good. My natural thing is I'll get behind it, and I'm hoping they'll do well. I hesitate to say anything, but I'm rootin' for 'em. So I'm taking up things that are on a personal level, on a human level, you know. Reagan said people in their communities have a responsibility to try to handle things in a grassroots way – community organizations and working together to ensure things that happen right in communities, and it has to be happening there or government isn't going to work, nothing's gonna change it if that's not there. So I agreed with some of those things that he said.

I look for good things in bad things, and I also look for bad things in good things. I don't see that it's all good or all bad – it's all a measured balance of things. So I've never backed off of what I was saying, what I was talking about. At the very beginning, after 9/11, when we thought we needed the Patriot Act, I was thinking, "Somebody's gotta do something to tighten this all up." I mean, we can't just have people coming in and out all the time. And it's still supposed to be a temporary measure that has to be re-voted on and re-voted on – it's never gonna be permanent. Of course, now we know that if this administration has its way, it'll be not only permanent, but it'll be more and more and more rights being taken away. So they took advantage of the situation and used it, which I think is – whoa, that's bad.

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