

The FULL story all day: [subscribe today for 99 cents](#)

The Boston Globe

Arts

Ballad of local singer-songwriters: 'Troubadour Blues'

Filmmaker pays tribute to acoustic artists

By James Sullivan | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 01, 2012

Tom Weber is a Harvard man, class of '72. During his years in Cambridge he spent countless hours at Club Passim, the Unicorn Coffee House, and other venues that hosted singer-songwriters. He saw Jackson Browne, John Prine, Tom Waits, and many other performers who went on to stardom. "I got to see all my heroes up close and personal," says Weber, who now lives in Pennsylvania.

Four decades later, Weber is still attending acoustic-music shows. For the past 10 years, he's done so with a digital video camera in hand. Monday night at Passim, Weber will screen "Troubadour Blues," his feature-length movie about the rhythms of life for the current generation of musicians toiling on the songwriters' circuit. Though this is Weber's first film, it's not his first music-related project: he coauthored a 1998 book about Jamaican music culture, "Reggae Island."

The title of the film echoes that of a song by Mark Erelli, one of several Boston-affiliated



MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Mark Erelli (pictured last month at Club Passim) appears in Tom Weber's "Troubadour Blues."

musicians who appear. Chris Smither lives in Western Massachusetts; Mary Gauthier ran the Back Bay restaurant Dixie Kitchen when she lived here.

The film centers around Peter Case, a sometime rock 'n' roller who has spent much of his career playing solo, in small clubs and coffee shops and at house parties, inspired by old bluesmen and Beat poets. No one in the film is a real star; they're all blue-collar, hard-traveling workers whose trade is their songs. "You create this thing, you live it all the time, and you take it to people," says Case in the film.

Erelli appreciates the fact that Weber concentrated on contemporary artists, without trotting out a historical lesson on roots music and the folk revival of the 1960s.

"This is going to sound horrible, but I'm kind of tired of hearing about the '60s," says Erelli, an indefatigable writer who has released nine albums under his own name since his 1999 debut. "I feel there's as much, if not more, great music going on today. That said, a lot of us owe a great debt to the '60s, just as the '60s owed a great debt to what came before that."

Like Weber, Erelli isn't too fond of the term "folk music," which often implies the performer has a political agenda. "Hackles are raised by topical songwriting," he says. "I try not to feel like I'm up there on a soapbox, spewing my opinions."

The artists filmed in "Troubadour Blues" surely have political views, but the majority of their songs are like short stories or phone calls, full of emotion and observation. "It's already written on your soul, what your subject matter is," says Case in the film.

There's romance in the troubadour lifestyle, notes another songwriter, Eve Goodman, on camera. The troubadour, she says, is a "modern-day cowboy."

Erelli, who grew up in Reading, says he discovered classic country music through Southern rock bands such as the Allman Brothers and Lynyrd Skynyrd. At a recent show at Passim billed as "Under the Covers," he joined Lori McKenna, Jake Armerding, and Zack Hickman playing twangy acoustic versions of songs by Tom Petty and Creedence Clearwater Revival, among others.

"I felt like I was Indiana Jones, unearthing these artifacts no one else knew about," Erelli recalls of his first exposure to roots music. When he started borrowing his parents' car to

attend church coffeehouse shows, his parents were nervous. He told them, "Everyone there is your age! I'm the youngest by 20 years, at least."

At Bates College in Maine, he began booking shows, starting with Chris Smither (through whom he met Weber). Delving into the music of Texas songwriters such as Townes Van Zandt and Jerry Jeff Walker, he was thrilled to find a photo of another Texan, Robert Earl Keen, wearing a T-shirt of the late New England songwriter Bill Morrissey.

"That was a real crystallizing moment for me," says Erelli, who has a master's degree from UMass in evolutionary biology. "I realized, oh, this is all the same stuff. And New England was a valid territory for roots music as well."

Weber says he logged more than 100,000 miles over 10 years, most of it around the Northeast, in gathering footage for the film. He estimates he spent \$20,000, mostly on gas, meals, and motel rooms. He raised \$12,000 in donations, which he used to pay for rights to the music in the film. About \$4 of each sale of the DVD goes directly to the artists, he says.

Like the troubadours he documents, he's taking the film out on the road. "I'm not Morgan Spurlock or Davis Guggenheim, a bankable documentarian," says Weber, who was laid off from his job teaching filmmaking at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh the same day the first copies of the DVD arrived at his door. "But I think I have a good film here, and I'm doing what I can to get it in front of people. It isn't a film that's going to go out of date quickly."

"I'm glad he chose to take a page from the troubadour playbook," says Erelli with a laugh. "The poor bastard."

James Sullivan can be reached at sullivanjames@verizon.net.

© 2012 THE NEW YORK TIMES COMPANY
