

Boxing Tugs At Our Crazy Hearts

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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The mechanics of cranking out a newspaper story are basically the same, whether you're a beat writer for a sports team, city government, crime, medicine, education or entertainment. Sources have to be interviewed, you have to get your facts right and there are deadlines to meet. If you're a reporter, the first and foremost goal is to provide as much pertinent information as space allows; columnists have a bit more leeway to offer opinions and interject a bit of themselves into their copy.

Why do I cover sports for my current employer, the Philadelphia Daily News, and always have throughout my career? Because it's more fun than writing about that other stuff, or at least it's supposed to be. And the fun factor is why I've frequently imagined that, were I not covering boxing matches and football and basketball games for my weekly recompense, I'd be a movie reviewer. If you can't be at ringside for the big fight or in the press section for the big game, a nice alternative would be going to the movies all week on the company's nickel, right?

Since my recovering-from-hand-surgery wife, a native of New Orleans as am I, could not be in Mardi Gras on Fat Tuesday with the frolicking hordes (inadvisable in any case for a woman whose left arm is wrapped up like a mummy's), we spent the afternoon in a more sedate pursuit of pleasantly killing a few hours. We began with a nice lunch at her favorite chain Mexican restaurant in a nearby shopping center, then were off to a mall a few miles up the road to see *Crazy Heart*, a critically acclaimed film about a fading, boozed-up country singer played by Oscar-nominated Jeff Bridges.

Generally speaking, I'm not that big on country music (I'm a classic rock guy, the better songs of which were created by artists who are now fading, boozed-up singers of another kind), but our other options were movies we'd already seen or had no interest in ever seeing. We both like Jeff Bridges, who's good in just about every role he slips into as easily as a well-worn favorite sweater. Besides, the movie reviewer for my paper had written that, as fallen country star Bad Blake, Bridges might have turned in his finest performance ever.

So there the better half and I were, in a theater with maybe a half-dozen other patrons for a late-afternoon showing of what might or might not be Jeff Bridges' greatest cinematic characterization, when I had an epiphany.

I was actually watching a boxing movie.

No, Bad Blake wasn't an ex-pug who had learned how to strum a guitar after quitting the ring. He never threw a punch during the movie's 111-minute running time, although he did get into an inebriated clinch or two with female fans after a particular night's set in a bowling alley or some other small-town Western honky-tonk. But I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd seen all this played out before, in other movies that didn't involve cowboy hats, snakeskin boots, pickup trucks and mournful ballads about love gone wrong.

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With a few minor script adjustments, you could imagine Bad Blake as Rocky Balboa. Or Billy Tully, which is the name of the used-up veteran fighter played by Stacy Keach in 1972's *Fat City*, in which a 23-year-old Jeff Bridges was cast as Ernie Munger, the young prospect on the rise.

Redemption – be it in the prize ring or some dive where the lights are low and the headliner is a 57-year-old country singer who hasn't had a hit since, say, the Reagan administration – is a common theme in boxing movies and those about weary, worldly-wise guitar pickers with whiskey-treated voices. And the reason is as obvious as the lyrics of any song by some good ol' boy about opportunities wasted and the realization that time isn't standing still for anybody.

Another very good actor, Jamie Foxx, has bestrode both sides of the boxing/music film divide – he won an Academy Award as Best Actor for playing blind R&B legend Ray Charles in 2004's *Ray*, and he portrayed Muhammad Ali sidekick Bundini Brown in 2001's *Ali* – summarized the connection in the *Ray* Charles biopic when asked why he was branching out into violin-heavy takes on country music classics in the mid-1960s.

“It's the stories, man,” Foxx, as Charles, responds.

Of course it's the stories. Boxing tells its stories uncommonly well, which is why many of the most cherished films about sports are about real and fictional fighters. Country music also tells its stories in a manner to which most people can relate, which is why *Crazy Heart* joins a long line of well-respected movies about the genre that include *Coal Miner's Daughter*, *I Walk the Line* and *Tender Mercies*, all of which won or were nominated for Oscars. Robert Duvall – who like Jeff Bridges is really good in any role he takes on – is one of the producers of *Crazy Heart* and has a bit role in it, too, as Bad Blake's friend who eventually helps save him from himself.

In *The Ultimate Book of Sports Movies*, co-authored by my former colleague, Ray Didinger, and Glen Macnow, boxing's holds the lion's share of places in the top 100 sports films of all time, as rated by Didinger and Macnow. *Rocky* is No. 1, while *Raging Bull* is No. 3, *Million Dollar Baby* is No. 12, *Body and Soul* is No. 18, *When We Were Kings* is No. 21, *The Set-Up* is No. 25, *Requiem for a Heavyweight* is No. 32, *Hard Times* is No. 38, *Cinderella Man* is No. 47, *The Harder They Fall* is No. 54, *Fat City* is No. 60, *The Boxer* is No. 65, *Champion* is No. 73 and *Diggstown* is No. 90.

And boxing inclusions in the top 100 could have been even more extensive. In a chapter entitled *Boxing Movies: The Winner and Still Champion*, Didinger and Macnow make a compelling case for the sweet science as the most audience-friendly sport in the movie universe.

“The sport of boxing has been in decline in for years,” they write. “Too many sanctioning bodies, too many titles and too little star power have caused fans to drift away. But that has not stopped Hollywood from making movies about boxing. It has been a popular subject for more than a century (Thomas Edison filmed a James J. Corbett exhibition match in 1892) and it is likely to remain so whether anybody can name the current heavyweight champion or not.

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“Why?

“For one thing, it is the easiest sport to film. There are two fighters, face to face, in a confined space. It is not like nine players spread out on a baseball diamond or 22 men in helmets and pad sprawling across a football field. For the purposes of lighting and camera placement, a boxing ring is the perfect stage. It makes for a quicker and therefore cheaper shoot.

“But more than that, boxing lends itself to melodrama. It is about an individual, not a team, so the writer can focus on the storyline. There is also the backdrop of vengeful mobsters, double-crossing managers and other shady characters that populate the sport and provide a wealth of material for movies.”

Didinger and Macnow even admit that more boxing movies could have, and maybe should have, made the top 100. They mention *The Champ* – both the original with Wallace Beery and the remake with Jon Voight, *Golden Boy*, *City for Conquest*, *Somebody Up There Likes Me*, *The Hurricane* and *The Great White Hope* as contenders that fell just a bit short.

I'd also include *Gentleman Jim*, the 1942 Errol Flynn vehicle about the life and times of James J. Corbett, which is also the favorite fight film of Mike Tyson.

It is my contention that, with a bit of imagination, all of the aforementioned boxing flicks could be adapted into movies about country singers. The theme music would have to shift from rap to something more middle America, but replacing Jay-Z with T Bone Burnett for orchestration is no major hurdle when you consider the premise. It's the stories, man, not the musical score, that drives the narrative.

Is it really that difficult to transpose the tale of the man in black, country legend Johnny Cash in *I Walk the Line*, with that of Johnny Tapia, whose troubled life almost begs for a movie treatment? Are the violent, antisocial issues faced by Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull* all that different from the demons that inhabited Hank Williams Jr. in the 1983 made-for-TV movie, *The Hank Williams Jr. Story*, which starred Richard Thomas as the rowdy Hank?

Country music has its tough guys (Waylon Jennings comes to mind) who might have been become fighters had they taken a different path, and its one-hit wonders like Billy Ray Cyrus, who did with "Achy Breaky Heart" what Buster Douglas did against Tyson that charmed day in Tokyo 20 years ago.

As for me, I'm hoping that Jeff Bridges finally wins his long-delayed Academy Award. It's about time a singing Rocky Balboa picked up a guitar and twanged his way to glory.