

'The Loneliest Man In Town' review: Viennese musician Al Cook stars in slow, meditative drama

BY **LEE MARSHALL** | 19 FEBRUARY 2026

Berlin Competition title will most appeal to Cook's existing fans



Dir: Tizza Covi, Rainer Frimmel. Austria. 2026. 86mins

Born in 1945, Viennese musician Al Cook plays the blues – but he's never been to the Mississippi Delta, or indeed the USA. His reference river is the Danube, and his real name is Alois Koch. In this melancholy, poignant, sometimes drolly amusing film by directing duo Tizza Covi and Rainer Frimmel, Cook/Koch plays a version of himself as an elderly, lonely Austrian bluesman facing eviction from the apartment where he was born, who is finally contemplating a visit to the southern US states where the blues music he loves is rooted.

A film for patient audiences

As in their debut *La Pivellina* (2009) or *Vera* (2022), which won the duo the Best Director award in Venice Horizons, Covi and Frimmel work here exclusively with non-professional actors, blurring the lines between reality and fiction. *Vera*, a portrait of the daughter of a famous Italian spaghetti western actor, derived authentic tension from this overlay by resisting and overturning the audience's initial assumptions about her (the effect was compounded by a Venice Best Actress prize for a woman we were never quite sure was acting).

The Loneliest Man in Town, which premieres in Berlin Competition, aims for something of the same effect, but does so in a more meditative mode. It touches on the erosion of Vienna's working-class architectural and cultural heritage, as well as the pathos inherent in the (presumably) fictional character played here by Koch. There is charm and tenderness here in abundance, but this is nevertheless a film for patient audiences, one that drags a little in its second half before summoning a lyrical ending. Theatrical action at home in Austria, where 'Al Cook' is a minor celebrity, is likely assured; elsewhere, further festival play could be a prelude to small specialist and streamer berths.

The character Koch plays feels a lot like one of those sad-eyed musicians that always turn up in an Aki Kaurismaki film. His chiselled, jowly face, all downward angles, is topped by a perky quiff; he looks a bit like a rockabilly Jacques Tati. We see him early on celebrating Christmas alone in his neat but down-at-heel apartment, in a Vienna block that has been earmarked for redevelopment. He fondly unsleeves and plays vinyl records in a room in the basement that he keeps as a shrine to the blues gods (among whom Koch counts Elvis – and a shrine also to a mysterious, vivacious brunette who appears in a framed photo on the wall.

Interviews and concert footage from old VHS tapes which he occasionally revisits show him as Al Cook in days gone by, when he seems to have had quite the following and even cut a few albums. Everything is a little dusty, worn and shabby. When a tough guy turns up in the apartment to persuade Koch – the only holdout in his empty block – to sign, sell and leave, he's just as elderly and stiff in his movements as the blues musician; he puts the screws on by telling Koch he will hang around and eat all his ham sandwiches.

Later, a succession of neighbours come to the apartment to browse through and carry away the possessions he is selling, many of which, like this dignified bluesman, have a certain vintage allure. As the apartment gradually empties, the floorboards emerge from under rugs, the lighter patches

on the wallpaper where photos and a mirror used to be. But the outline of a crucifix, present from the beginning, hints at other, older removals and reshapings.

Meanwhile, an older Vienna is being dismantled as demolition cranes tear down century-old facades and family-run neighbourhood bars that refused to turn hipster are forced to close. Gradually, we realise that the stubborn Koch, who could have gone commercial but chose to stick with the old, rural Mississippi blues he loved, was onto something.

This is the perfect soundtrack for the end of an era, even in Mitteleuropa. Light is sensitively deployed to complement this aural lament in passages of visual beauty: dust on the surface of a grand piano in an empty apartment; Koch's lonely candlelit Christmas; or screen light flickering on the expressive face of this relict musician and his date as they watch an early Elvis movie at the lovingly restored Metro Cinema – today, aptly, a revival house run by the Austrian Film Archive.

Production company: Vento Film

International sales: Be for Films info@beforfilms.com

Producers: Tizza Covi, Rainer Frimmel

Screenplay: Tizza Covi

Cinematography: Rainer Frimmel

Production design: Lotte Lyon, Christian Gschier

Editing: Tizza Covi, Emma Artmann

Music: Al Cook

Main cast: Alois Koch, Brigitte Meduna, Alfred Blechinger, Flurina Schneider, Sarah Morissette, Natascha Hiermann, Ingrid Schaffernack

