

'The Loneliest Man in Town' Review: An Aging Austrian Musician Plays Himself Playing the Blues in a Quietly Moving Portrait

'Vera' directors Tizza Covi and Rainer Frimmel craft another intimate drama that skirts close to reality, this time about a Vienna musician losing his home.

By [Siddhant Adlakha](#) ▾



Courtesy of the Berlinale

artist Al Cook. The last holdout in his worn-down apartment building — where he was born Alois Koch in 1945 — the threat of losing his home brings into sharp focus the life he’s lived, and the objects and mementos that hold his memories, as he contemplates finally visiting the United States, where the music he holds dear first took shape.

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With a soundtrack of rich recordings by blues greats like Lonnie Johnson and Bertha “Chippie” Hill (as well Cook’s own original tunes), the film begins with a sense of lived-in routine, as it captures Cook hobbling up his old spiral staircase to set up his modest Christmas tree. The “most wonderful time of the year” for many, Cook’s holiday is spent trying to get the electricity back on, as he reflects on pictures and keepsakes of his late wife laid neatly on a mantelpiece, like a holy shrine. This isn’t his first brush with inconvenience caused by predatory developers who want to tear his building down, and it won’t be his last, so he moves through the world with begrudging deference, as Covi and Frimmel observe him in mostly static frames, panning only occasionally to track him shuffling down hallways.

Although the directors take great pains to carefully capture each record, photo, video tape, vinyl record and 8mm film he pores over, perhaps their biggest strength in a film like this is knowing just how and when to get out of the way.

is a naturally alluring subject, and a somewhat caricatured one as well,

complement this natural magnetism, and to highlight the sorrow underlying his predicament and the nostalgia it unearths, the film's dim, often candlelit 16mm texture bears the faded glow of a memory.

The builders' alternating harassment and bribery leaves Cook with little recourse, especially when mafioso-like representatives begin dropping by at all hours, leading to dry exchanges — what little dialogue the film has is extremely funny. His pushback is withheld and matter-of-fact, even though he knows it's probably a losing battle. Arguments play out with the same quiet tempo as scenes of the aging guitarist slowly going between his dusty walk-up and his basement recording studio, where he hopes to record one final album, as the defeating inevitability of the situation sets in; that is, for the audience, more so than for Cook himself. He seems to have accepted his fate, and he even contemplates ways to move on — including a trip to Memphis and the Mississippi Delta — even though letting go seems to be the hardest thing in the world.

Loving a culture at a distance can come with complications, especially as it travels and is diluted by market forces (or, in the case of the Louisiana-themed dive bar where Cook performs, becomes pastiche). However, Cook is also an avid student, so his music retains a painful authenticity, despite performing a distinctly African American genre as a white man an ocean away. The old video tapes he watches of himself feature interviews in which he articulates the origins of blues, and bemoans the commercialized nature of the music industry, which he believes stifles honest artistry. He reads and re-reads the biographies of Black pioneers of blues and proto-rock and roll, like Robert Johnson and Ma Rainey, stoking his continued interest in visiting and maybe even settling in the African south, and taking up residence in rural juke joints.

immigration story, the drama of which unfolds on the faces of concerned friends and onlookers – including an old girlfriend from 50 years ago – with whom he shares his intentions, even before he actually emigrates. However, even these heartrending dramatic ironies fail to sully the indelible spirit with which the film captures Cook and his wistfulness, or the way it draws out memories associated with everyday objects and spaces.

But despite keeping one eye trained on the United States as a possibly-lost bastion of artistic freedom, it does these things without relying on the naked sentimentality of Hollywood musical biopics, often defined by cheap callbacks and audiovisual over-emphasis. Instead, the filmmakers let the images and the music speak for themselves, so that ultimately, the physical fabrics which most hold memory and emotion end up being the celluloid itself, and Cook's own thoughtfully measured expression. Before long, his entire past fades into view, making "The Loneliest Man in Town" an unassuming portrait of a life lived through music, and one that limps on – in whatever way it still can – despite loss and defeat, channeling melancholy as though the film weren't just about the blues, but were the blues itself.

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Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (Competition), Feb. 19, 2026. Running time: 86 MIN.

Production: (Austria) A Vento Film production. (World sales: Be For Films, Paris.) Producers:

With: Alois Koch, Brigitte Meduna, Alfred Blechinger, Flurina Schneider. (German, English dialogue)

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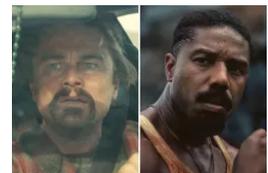


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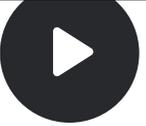
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