

Mr. Prairie Soul

By [Josef Woodward](#), March 23, 2006

Neil Young: Heart of Gold

A musical documentary directed by Jonathan Demme.

Using an objective medium to get at the heart of what makes the great Neil Young so great — even in his missteps along the way — is tricky business. Just ask Jimmy McDonough, who wrote *Shakey*, a fascinating and thorough, but also necessarily elliptical biography of the man. Ask Jim Jarmusch, whose fine 1997 film *Year of the Horse* was part-concert-documentary, part-investigation into Young's band Crazy Horse (with a wary, tight-lipped Young dodging the camera).

With his ravishingly fine concert film *Neil Young: Heart of Gold*, Jonathan Demme gets closer, by staying skillfully, almost poetically, out of the way of the singer and his songs. Then again, that's partly because Young is in an unusually earnest, self-reflective mood these days. Young's amazing and deep album *Prairie Wind* is a very different portrait of Mr. Soul than we're used to, after the passing of his father and the mortal reminder of his brain surgery for an aneurysm. On the album, and in the premiere concert and film, Young nods to friends, loved ones, and places important to him, including his prairie-cloaked hometown of Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Last August, Young gave the world premiere of his new work in Nashville's legendary Ryman Theater, home of the Grand Ole Opry. Just as Demme brought the right blend of filmic style and documentary humility to the Talking Heads flick *Stop Making Sense*, here he gets deep into the feeling of this concert — more an event than a gig. Demme refuses to play the contemporary game of switching nervously between excessive cameras, swooping crane shots, or other trickery, and his easy-does-it approach respects the design of the concert, with backdrops and neo-C&W costumes, as well as to the very atmosphere inside the Ryman. As Young plays "This Old Guitar," he points out that he is playing the guitar once owned by Hank Williams, who last played in this theater in 1951.

There are brief interviews and some pre-concert setup, including Young offering a concert prayer: "We're gonna get out there and let the muse have us, give it a shot." The muse is in the house, as Young and his expandable band — including Emmylou Harris and his wife Pegi — cover songs from *Prairie Wind*, and a few golden old ones. It doesn't take many listens to love his new tunes, and even his big old hits "Heart of Gold" and "Old Man" sound great here, with a new meaning hovering over a line like "... searching for a heart of gold, and I'm getting old."

The film ends with a powerfully atmospheric coda, as Young plays on an empty stage in an empty theater as the credits roll. The last shot we see is the empty house and the overlaid words: "for daddy." For any Young fan, casual or rabid, this is must-see stuff.