



Truck Stop musical number: The camera follows Spoon in a one-take tracking shot as they make their way around the diner singing.

Maya Bankovic Revisits

# My Prairie Home

By Fanen Chiahemmen

Maya Bankovic

The documentary *My Prairie Home* opens with a long take of the horizon, only earth and sky are reversed. A wheat-coloured band runs across the top of the screen, seemingly held up by the wide prairie blue. The reverse shot is a tip-off to the viewer about the journey ahead, associate CSC member Maya Bankovic, tells *Canadian Cinematographer*. "It lets you know this isn't going to be a straightforward story about growing up in the Canadian prairies. It's a beautiful place, but there's something off about it," she says.

*My Prairie Home*, which was the only Canadian feature film in competition at this year's Sundance film festival, is a meditative musical journey through the life of indie singer-songwriter Rae Spoon. Spoon – who happens to be transgendered and goes by the gender-neutral pronoun "they" – tells of growing up different in Alberta under the roof of a strict Pentecostal schizophrenic father before finding an alternative form of salvation in music. Released in conjunction with their latest album of the same name, the film is part road movie, following Spoon on tour between Calgary and Winnipeg, and just like a musical it is interwoven with song numbers that expand on the themes and stories Spoon recounts.

Bankovic, who shared director of photography duties with cinematographer Derek Howard, knew when she signed on to shoot the National Film Board documentary that it would be unconventional, having worked with director Chelsea McMullan before. "I've been lucky to collaborate with her on several projects," Bankovic says. "She has a very distinctive visual tone which really appealed to my aesthetic, and I know what kind of imagery she's looking for in terms of coverage – or sometimes lack thereof."

Some of the footage in *My Prairie Home* came from a shoot in 2010, when with a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, Bankovic, McMullan and another cinematographer, Alejandro Coronado, went on tour with Spoon and produced a short film. That experience became a "dress rehearsal" for the feature documentary, with some of the footage ending up in the final project, Bankovic says. When the team went on tour with Spoon again in 2012 – this time with Howard as a co-cinematographer – they employed the same shooting methods they had used two years earlier.

"Touring with Rae means enormous amounts of time on a Greyhound bus," Bankovic says. "In order to capture the feeling of that isolation, we needed

to properly experience it with them instead of getting some snippet or representation of it. We had to live it." So the cinematographers came up with a division of labour that involved Bankovic putting in long bus rides across vast distances to capture life on the tour bus while Howard would follow in a minivan, gathering morsels of symbolism and imagery in the landscape around them. "So for example, I would be shooting Rae's performance on a glacier while Derek roamed around grabbing beautiful shots of the Calgary mountains or keeping an eye out for the rainbow that just happened to show up," Bankovic says.

Travelling on the road with Spoon provided opportunities to gather stories from the musician – about haunting childhood memories, including the death of an infant brother, witnessing their father's declining mental health, attending evangelical church events and falling for a girl at school – that would be woven into the narrative. "When we weren't shooting on the Greyhound we packed all of the camera gear and instruments into a minivan and drove thousands of kilometers across the prairies, Chelsea doing the driving and Rae filling the silences with stories and music. I was mostly in the back seat with the camera poised on Rae, keeping the lav microphone on Rae for weeks at a time," Bankovic recalls.

Shooting this way demanded a lot of precision from the small documentary unit, which included McMullan, the cinematographers, production designer Leanne MacKay and NFB producer Lea Marin. "Keeping up with a musician's touring schedule was actually incredibly challenging for us because it meant we had to keep batteries on charge in our minivan all the time and offloading on hard drives on the bus before making it to Rae's next show. This meant taking any opportunity to use power and available space to set up our data management systems," Bankovic says. "Sometimes we would resort to charging batteries on 10-hour car rides off of inverters plugged into the car lighter. Hotel room outlets were always maxed out. You take what you can get when you're on the road."



For the straight-to-camera effect we used the Eye Direct, which is basically a system of two-way mirrors that allowed Rae to see Chelsea's face reflected in front of the lens. I could then shoot through the reflective glass and not pick up Chelsea's reflection in the recorded image.

The crew would reconvene every night at the venues where Spoon was performing. "It wasn't just about shooting the show. It would be shooting before and after the show, often there would be small scenes that would come out of Rae interacting with fans or club promoters and the ins and outs of the business of being an indie musician," Bankovic says. "We'd have to really be on our toes until basically Rae went to bed."



They also had to be on their toes to capture unexpected dramatic moments that could occur during shows, as Bankovic recounts did transpire when a man who may or may not have been Spoon's estranged father showed up for a show in Regina. The team half expected Spoon's father to make an appearance – against the singer's wishes – and Bankovic kept her eye on the door while trying to get multiple angles of Spoon in concert. "It was Chelsea who spotted someone in the doorway, and she whispered my name and nodded towards the entrance. I was stunned to see someone who fit the description of Rae's father appear as if from nowhere," Bankovic recalls. "He was lurking in the shadows, and my instinct as a cinematographer was that I wanted to see his face. I wanted to read his emotions through his expressions, and I wanted the visual confirmation of who he was. I bumped the ISO to unspeakable levels in this situation, because it was precisely the type of documentary scenario in which content trumps all else, but I quickly knocked it back down when I realized that not only were we never going to get a clear shot of his face under the murky lighting in the venue anyway, but that the vague uncertainty coupled with the menacing quality of a figure dancing to the music in silhouette would be far more interesting."

"Conceptually speaking, this was indeed how Rae envisioned their father: as a looming figure in the shadows. Now you see him, now you don't. So what difference would it make to the audience to see what the man looks like?" Bankovic continues. "These thoughts ran through my mind within a span of seconds, and I knocked the ISO back down and slid a couple of meters over to get a shot of the man in the doorway against light, further accentuating him as a simple silhouette, all the while trying my best to remain invisible."

Despite the production requiring two cinematographers, their images remained congruent because the DPs were both well-versed in McMullan's visual language. "The fact that both Derek and I have such a strong understanding of Chelsea's aesthetic framework means we are able match our styles to one another's very intuitively, with little to no discussion," Bankovic offers. "I think our dedication to adhering to these aesthetic parameters is what gave *My Prairie Home* a visual consistency despite the fact that three cinematographers contributed to it over the years."

Bankovic also praises Redlab Toronto's Walt Biljan for the way he married the footage from the two tours. "He did such amazing things working with that older footage," she says. "Because you could feel the difference in the texture with that footage versus our new footage because the older footage was 720. He worked really hard to finesse it to a point where it didn't feel archival. It felt like it existed in the same time."

Throughout the tour Bankovic and Howard employed two NFB-provided Sony EX3s, supplemented with some black-and-white Kodak Super 8 film. Having a zoom lens rather than a set of primes, the EX3 was the perfect camera to tour with, according to Bankovic. "It was important just to be able to hop out, grab an extreme close-up of something and then get an extreme wide of that same thing on the side of the highway and then just continue on our way," she reports. "We really wanted a no-frills approach, and especially being on the Greyhound, where we're so confined in our space. We wanted to make sure we could maximize the amount of coverage we could get."

A focal point in preproduction was deciding how to integrate the musical numbers seamlessly into the narrative, Bankovic recalls, saying the numbers still needed to evoke a traditional music video aesthetic so they felt a bit surreal. "There was a conversation about whether they would be shot on the same format or on the RED or on film – how to incorporate them in a way that makes them special but not completely dissimilar," Bankovic says. "In the end it was case by case. Most numbers we ended up shooting on the Sony EX3 format." Like the first musical number, which was shot in a truck stop diner. Spoon starts off sitting at the counter then breaks into song. The camera follows them in a one-take tracking shot as they make their way around the diner singing, while real patrons carry on about their business.

For the musical number "Love is a Hunter," which became the climax of the film, it felt right to shoot on the RED ONE MX – provided by SIM Digital and fitted with Cooke miniS4/i lenses – "and treat it like a proper industry standard style music video that would be a bit glossier and would have choreography and costumes and Steadicam," Bankovic says. "We knew it would stand out, but knowing where it would be situated in the film it felt right to do that one that way."

Throughout the film Spoon also gives on-camera interviews, with the help of an EyeDirect, a photographic device that enables the subject to look into the lens thus guaranteeing eye contact with the viewer. "It's a box that sits in front of the camera, and it has a two-way mirror and so Chelsea's reflection would be in front of the lens. She would be sitting beside the camera but her face would be reflected right in front of the lens," Bankovic explains. "It gives a more immediate effect to that interaction between the subject and the audience. You feel like Rae's telling you the story. I think it's actually quite subliminal and I don't see a lot of films where the subject is looking directly into the camera, outside of the PSA commercial documentary realm."

Bankovic would light those motel-room interviews with



Maya Bankovic



Nadia Tan



Louise Muckey

Above left: "We found a way into an old car impound lot in Drumheller, Alberta, where Rae knew we could get an excellent shot of a 30' Jesus statue that overlooks the town," Bankovic says. Below left: Co-cinematographer Derek Howard. Above: The crew on location capturing images of the Rockies.

"a simple Kino Flo Diva set-up," she says. "We also carried ARRI 1K Fresnels and a couple of Source Fours with us to supplement the lighting at concerts if we needed to."

While the prairies feature prominently in the documentary they are not merely beauty shots; they also capture a sense of isolation and loneliness. "The Canadian landscape is so stunning, so beautiful," Bankovic says. "But we had to approach it with the same ambivalence that Rae feels towards that geographical area – it's a visually beautiful place, but it's also the site of a lot of pain and hardship. If there was a beautiful sunset it was important to capture it, but I knew it might be used in a melancholic way. And movement was important too because it's a road movie and it's about touring and about getting out of there."

That opening shot of the upside-down horizon, Bankovic reveals, was captured "guerilla style" by just driving on the highway with the minivan door open and shooting out of it. "That was such a silly indie thing to do," the cinematographer confesses. "But we had to do it that way because it was the only thing we could do on a shoestring at that time."

The DPs had to be much more diligent about the way they captured the various emblems of that part of the country – relics of the old west juxtaposed with the modern suburban realities. In one sequence, Spoon's meditation on the sym-

bolism of their father's mustache plays over shots of a giant statue of a cowboy in the middle of a field, with close-ups of the cowboy's hat, hands and boots.

"Chelsea has this term she refers to as hosing the scene down," Bankovic explains. "She'll often tell me, 'We're going to go in here to get the scene so just hose it down,' which means, 'Just give me every single option.' We get wides, we get mediums, we get all the details and we experiment with some off kilter composition. And then she basically uses that as raw material to work these visual elements into the concept. That's why we love shooting on the EX3 where you just have the power of that zoom, and you're able to get such a variety of shots in such a small amount of time."

Bankovic says what was challenging about the documentary was also what she appreciated the most about the process: setting the creative parameters and sticking to them. "Because in documentary there is often this impulse to just keep the camera rolling, pop it off a tripod, go handheld, just do what you have to do to get the scene, and then a lot of those aesthetic elements fall by the wayside," she muses. "So I think fighting the impulse to go about it as a 100 per cent vérité documentary was a challenge that I didn't begrudge. I really hope to take that level of discipline with me in everything that I do. That's one of the reasons why I love documentaries, not just capturing reality but giving it a shape that's artful." 🍷