Smoke and Mirrors

July 1, 2000 By Angelo Ragaza

Benjamin Smoke
Cowboy Booking International
Opens July 28 in New York City and Los Angeles, wide release in August

By the time Benjamin Smoke was made—as the press notes say, “from ‘short ends’ of film left over from other jobs”—the singer and PWA, hailed by devotees like Michael Stipe and Patti Smith as a key figure in late ’70s underground music, was on his last legs and all but forgotten. But his songs—which Smoke performed in drag, backed by, among other things, a banjo player and a cellist—exert a surprising force on-screen. “I’m not much, but I’m honest,” Smoke croons, his voice a growly mix of Billy Bragg and David Bowie, “and this ain’t just another sad and silly love song/ Believe me, I had rather cry in my beer/and keep this to myself.” In the ’80s, the singer retreated from New York City’s heady punk scene to a derelict mill town outside of Atlanta, where this film was shot. The only question it leaves unanswered is why stardom eluded Smoke. Maybe as the song suggests, he wanted to keep his life’s trajectory to himself. In his filmed interviews, he does profess a wish that he’d been more vocal about having HIV. “I always thought that…I’d be ‘Mouth of the South’ about it, because I’ve always been mouthy about things that bother people,” he says. “And now I realize that I really have disappointed myself staying so quiet and in the closet about it. I feel like it’s my duty to show that it’s not a death sentence.” Indeed, Smoke donned his dress, kicked up his heels and sang his arresting lyrics right up until his death last year at 39.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Smoke-and-Mirrors-10287-6043