

Murray's 'Lost' cause resonates in Boston

By Tom Kielty
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

For Boston film fans, it was admittedly hard not to applaud Sean Penn's best actor honor at Sunday night's Academy Awards. He gave a powerhouse performance in local writer Dennis Lehane's "Mystic River," and his striding out of the Kodak Theatre with an Oscar was a fitting tribute to a career marked by challenging and often brave choices.

Yet as spring struggles to emerge from beneath another cold New England winter, it was hard not to feel empathy for his fellow nominee Bill Murray. Like our beloved Red Sox, Murray had taken an underdog role in the small-budget "Lost in Translation" to the brink of immortality, only to have his hopes dashed on the last play of the season.

It is a fate well known to denizens of the Hub. Murray, up against established leading men Penn, Johnny Depp, and Jude Law, as well as previous Oscar winner Sir Ben Kingsley, was a black sheep in the category. None-



AP PHOTO

'Lost in Translation' star Bill Murray, who lost out to Sean Penn in 'Mystic River' for the Academy Award for best actor, attended a Vanity Fair Oscar party Sunday in West Hollywood.

theless, his portrayal of a movie star on the decline coming to terms with his lot in life against the backdrop of another culture

fulfilled the melancholic promise Murray first demonstrated in "Rushmore," this time with Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences members taking notice.

As if the nomination were not enough, there was also Murray's victory in the Independent Spirit Awards the previous day in Santa Monica. Nabbing the best male lead award was akin to sweeping the Yankees in a mid-season series. The award gave legions of the actor's fans a sense that this might indeed be their year, that Murray's subtle and often eccentric career actually stood a chance of being celebrated at the highest level.

So when Nicole Kidman, the previous year's best actress winner, read Penn's name, it was

somewhat akin to Aaron Boone's season-ending home run in last year's American League Championship Series with the Yankees. A magical ride, in which the underdog seemed poised to snatch an improbable victory, was over.

Murray's stoic demeanor spoke volumes. Penn, Depp, and Law are well on their way to enjoying strong careers while Kingsley already has a golden reminder of his success. None is likely to have to search far for the type of script that will once again land them in contention for Hollywood's highest honor. Murray, however, is and always has been a horse of a different color.

The moment was not lost on host Billy Crystal, who jokingly directed the attention to Murray following Penn's acceptance, imploring the actor to not leave. While those in attendance applauded and Murray, as is his custom, deflected the adulation, there was an overwhelming sense that opportunities like "Lost In Translation" come only once in a very long time.

In her acceptance speech for best original screenplay, Sofia Coppola said that all writers need a muse, and for her, that muse was Bill Murray. One can only hope that other writers were listening, and that for Murray there is another at-bat in his future.

Pop Music

They make sound waves on late-night television

Tube talent scouts bring in the bands

By Tom Kielty
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

It's not only night owls who find themselves in this position — snug beneath the covers or curled up on the couch, basking in the television's blue post-prime-time glow, scanning the rapidly expanding programming universe for something of interest. In many cases, our choice of late-night show depends on who its musical guest is.

An established, currently hot, or intriguing musical act is more likely to earn the commitment. In New York City, where most late-night talk shows are produced, a small network of talent executives spend their waking hours readjusting their grip on the pulse of pop culture.

Each is trying to be the first to present a hot new artist or land an established star, while offering viewers a range of musical genres. Of course, sometimes they're just scrambling to match their crazy schedules with the even crazier lifestyles of the artists.

At the "Late Show With David Letterman," these responsibilities belong to talent executive Sheila Rogers. A former Rolling Stone magazine writer, Rogers decided to take the job based on the show's high-quality musical content. She's now been there 11 years.

"[The Letterman show was] always taking risks and breaking new artists," she says, "so I was excited about that."

Breaking new artists is an essential component of a show's hip quotient. Following music-industry buzz and getting out to see bands in clubs, talent scouts are constantly on the prowl. For these purposes, "Letterman" hired Sheryl Zelikson as music coordinator. Another set of ears paid off with immediate results.

"Sheryl is the one who was first talking about the White Stripes, long before anybody had heard of



PHOTO/MICHAEL SIMON

Jamie Granet (above) of "Last Call With Carson Daly" and Sheila Rogers (near left) and Sheryl Zelikson of "Late Show With David Letterman" try to find acts before they get hot.

them," Rogers says. "She's really great at keeping her eye out for new things."

Finding hot acts might seem easy in New York. But Jim Pitt, music producer for "Late Night With Conan O'Brien," lives in Nashville. He spends the majority of his time there, usually visiting New York for a week each month. In a world made smaller by technology, distance isn't an obstacle.

"So much of it is just talking to publicists and people in the business," Pitt says. "Most acts come through here... so I go out and see a fair amount of music."

After attending Boston College, where he played in a cover band, Pitt started booking talent at "Saturday Night Live." There he befriended a staff writer named Conan O'Brien.

Pitt recalls early O'Brien test shows that included a then-unknown singer named Sheryl Crow (similarly, Boston's own Gentlemen played early test tapings of "Last Call With Carson Daly"). As a fledgling late-night host, O'Brien didn't have the clout that Letterman had. They were also battling the now-defunct "Arsenio Hall Show" for hip-hop guests, a battle Pitt concedes Hall won.



"I think that's the only talk show in history that'd really done hip-hop and rap the way it needs to be done, which is making it a big party with the audience as part of it, a lot of call and response," Pitt says. "Our studio audience... in the early days we didn't always have a full audience, and they were not rabid fans."

A full house is no longer a problem for "Conan," nor is scheduling high-profile stars. Recently, Pitt has presented Bruce Springsteen, the Dave Matthews Band, and Tony Bennett to his 12:30 a.m. viewers.

Pondering the recent willingness of high-profile artists to do the program, he says: "I think they find when they reach a certain point, they do need as much TV exposure as they can get because radio is such a wasteland."

For Jamie Granet, talent executive for "Last Call With Carson Daly," the willingness of big stars to do the show presented a bit of a quandary. Despite Daly's ubiquity on MTV, where he hosted the popular afternoon show "Total Request Live," many questioned how he would perform in the decidedly un-teen time slot of 1:30 to 2:30 a.m.

"Our audience is a little more collegiate, and that lets us do things like Jack Johnson or Ben Kweller, both who have become bigger names," Granet says. "You kind of wonder if they care about a Peter Gabriel or a James Taylor, but our James Taylor show was one of our highest rated. I guess the audience will cross over or people that are such big James Taylor fans will stay up to watch it."

It helps that each of the late-night hosts is, to a varying extent, a music fan. Daly has an established relationship with many of today's hottest young stars, while O'Brien is, by Pitt's standards, a guitar nut. But it was Letterman who recently went the extra mile for a musician when he invited his longtime friend Warren Zevon on for an entire show.

The program — which included an extended interview with Zevon, who was recently diagnosed as terminally ill, as well as three music segments — revealed a heartfelt mutual admiration between the two men.

Rogers recalls Letterman's role in that show. "Dave said, 'Let's give him a few songs,' after Zevon had requested one. "Very quickly he

decided that Warren should be the whole show. That was Dave's idea. Dave's only concern was that Warren was up for it, and he was."

While a supportive host is a booker's dream, "Saturday Night Live" coproducer Marci Klein has no such luxury, working with a different host for each of the show's 20 episodes. Still, it's the compressed weekly schedule that makes her job most difficult.

"Most other shows have four or five shows a week, so they have more chances to book more bands," she says. "We don't. Our conflict is that we love all these bands. Sometimes there are five bands for one date, and we know we're not going to get all five in for one year."

Nonetheless, "SNL" remains late night television's marquee slot. On that show, one booking coup is mentioned most — for its absolutely perfect timing.

On Jan. 11, 1992, the show's musical guest was a skyrocketing band from Seattle called Nirvana. The band's album "Nevermind" had been declared the No. 1 album in the country that week, dethroning Michael Jackson and, for many in the vast national audience, providing the first exposure

Critics' Picks

Upcoming

FRANK MOREY — at the Independent tonight. A blues-punk artist with all kinds of fire and grit in his material. He held a Cambridge crowd spellbound last week, so look for more of the same. 617-440-6022; www.theindo.com.

RACHEL MCCARTNEY — at Club Passim on Wednesday. Having made a quantum improvement in the past year, the Boston-based singer shares her latest story songs. 617-492-7879; www.clubpassim.com.

HOT STOVE/COOL MUSIC JIMMY FUNDAISER — at the Paradise on Wednesday. Sports guru Peter Gammons and Boston rocker Kay Hanley offer their third annual fund-raiser, joined by Bill Janovitz's Crown Victoria and American HiFi. 617-562-8800; www.nextticketing.com/paradise.

TONI LYNN WASHINGTON — at Ryles on Saturday. The classy soul singer steps into a room known for jazz, but don't worry. Her grace and professionalism would make her at home anywhere. 617-876-9330; www.rylesjazz.com.

STEVE MORSE

For complete listings, visit ae.boston.com/events.

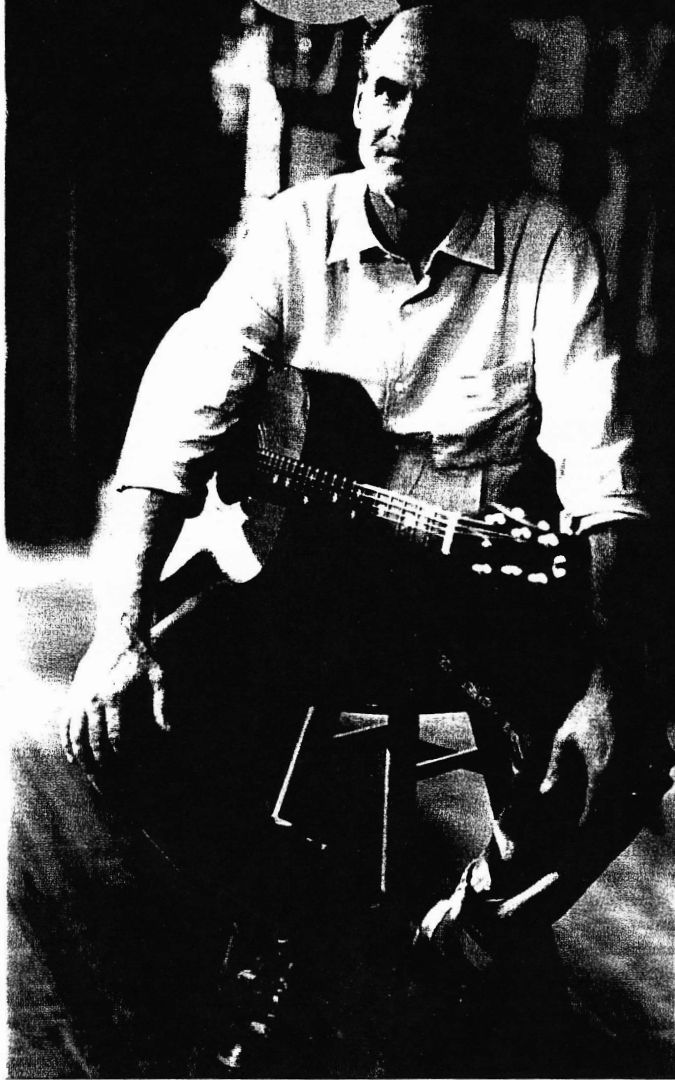
to the phenomenon that would become known as grunge.

For Pitt, who was then still at "SNL" and booked Nirvana, the episode holds vivid memories.

"That was a pretty amazing experience," he says. "You always hope you get bands at the moment they're just exploding, and that was the case there. All that fall I just watched the album climb and heard all that buzz, and finally we booked them."

"The whole weekend was kind of crazy, trying to get Kurt [Cobain] onstage for a live show when he wouldn't come out of the bathroom," he recalls. "He almost didn't make it out for one of the songs, but it turned very memorable, actually. It was one of those moments."

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



COOL AS FOLK
James Taylor
recorded his latest
CD, *October Road*,
at Davis Square's
Q Division studio.

Music

Record Breakers

Local studios are once again on track. By Tom Kielty

"THE PLACES WHERE THE BEST rock 'n' roll gets made are not pretty," says Paul Kolderie. He should know. Fifteen years ago, in a section of Roxbury so tough they called their studio "Fort Apache," Kolderie, Sean Slade, and Gary Smith made

some of the best rock 'n' roll this city has ever heard. The Pixies' debut, *Come On Pilgrim*, was an innovative mix of melody and mayhem, loud and soft dynamics banging into each other. The album put the Boston recording community

on the international map.

It was a distinction that waned some in the late '90s. Now it's beginning to make a comeback. National acts are again recording in Boston. Los Angeles-based S.T.U.N. just tracked its major-label debut

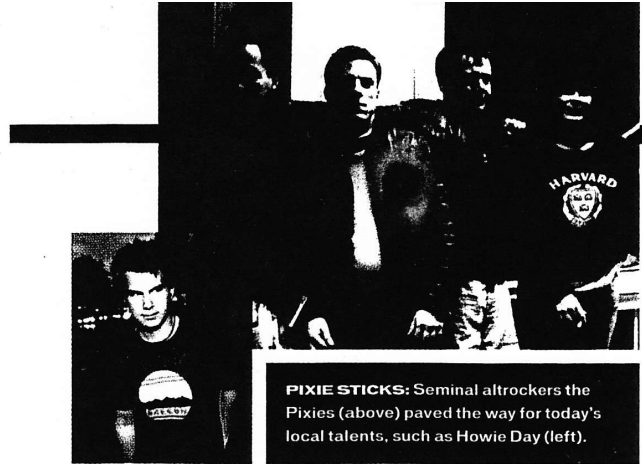
with Slade at Q Division studio in Davis Square, and another California band, the Vandals, worked there with Kolderie.

IT WAS AROUND 1985, AFTER outgrowing their home recording setup, that Kolderie, Slade, and a few partners leased space on Norfolk Street for Fort Apache. The studio's first manager was Smith, a local musician who would eventually come to hold an ownership stake. It was Smith who, after establishing his keen ear by recording the demos that got Throwing Muses a major-label deal, next turned to a couple of UMass dropouts. "We were both hanging out in nightclubs and somewhere we bumped into each other," reminisces Pixies singer Frank Black.

"I remember putting that together going, 'You know, this is pretty good,'" says Kolderie today. That "pretty good" collection got the band a record deal and gave the Fort in particular and the city's rock scene in general immediate respectability, paving the way for other, more illustrious Fort clients, including Radiohead and Hole.

When the time came to make the Pixies' followup, however, things got messy. Finances, among other factors, caused the rift. "Producer Steve Albini called me and said, 'It looks like we can't come to your studio because there's too much friction,'" remembers Kolderie. "I gotta do it in Boston. Do you recommend any other place?" Kolderie sent him to Q Division.

Opened on Albany Street in 1985, Q Division was the brainchild of former Milton Academy classmates Mike Denneen and Jon Lupfer. Mirroring the Fort's artist-friendly ethos, Q established itself through the likes of Aimee Mann and Jon Brion. But the Pixies' sophomore effort, *Surfer Rosa*, thrust the studio into the national limelight. ❧



PIXIE STICKS: Seminal altrockers the Pixies (above) paved the way for today's local talents, such as Howie Day (left).

"Right after *Surfer Rosa*, we did the *Gigolo Aunts* record," Denneen recalls. "Then *Letters to Cleo*, then *Jen Trynin*. Then things started picking up."

But the South End industrial wasteland where Q Division resided was quickly gentrifying. In 2000, Q relocated to Davis Square, with two state-of-the-art studios. "It's night and day, literally," says former *Letters to Cleo* singer Kay Hanley, who did her solo debut, *Cherry Marmalade*, at the new Q. "The other place was just night, windowless, airless, so cluttered. The new Q is bright and beautiful."

So bright and beautiful that Q now regularly hosts national acts, including Ozzy Osbourne, Ryan Adams, and *Destiny's Child*. The greatest coup so far has been James Taylor, who recorded his latest top 10 album, *October Road*, there.

"Initially, Q appealed to me because it was local," admits Taylor, who lives in Brookline. "I was pleasantly surprised to find a damn fine studio."

"James Taylor coming in was just huge," says Denneen. "This thing that we were trying to do, we did it well enough that people of this caliber who are used to a certain level of professionalism and quality are comfortable here. That's really great."

NEW ALLIANCE STUDIOS IN the Fenway was nowhere near that level. "I recorded anybody who rang the doorbell," says founder Andrew "Mudrock" Murdock of the early days.

Started as a demo studio, New Alliance grew slowly until 1996, when one of the bands ringing the bell was an unknown metal act called *Godsmack*.

"That was a record they wanted to do to sell at gigs, and we did it quick," Murdock says of *Godsmack's* self-titled debut. "I gave them a bunch of free time to finish because they had run out of money." The record went on to sell more than 3 million copies, making Murdock a producing star and ultimately taking him to Los Angeles.

Now New Alliance is run by Murdock's partner, Alvan Long. On a recent Monday night, this year's WBCN Rock & Roll Rumble winners, the *Gentlemen*, recorded a live set while members of the previous year's runner-up band, *Cracktorch*, manned the soundboard.

It's local acts that benefit most from Boston's recording talent. Denneen's work with young songster Howie Day was essential in helping Day jump to a major label (which promptly re-released his album, *Australia*, recorded at Q). And although the most recent *Fort Apache*, on Edmunds Street in Cambridge, closed in July, *Kolderie* and *Slade* are still at it. "I'm just going to do bands around here that I think are good, like *Cave In* or *Piebald* or *Dropkick Murphys*," says *Kolderie*. "You don't go to a restaurant because of the great kitchen. You go because of who's doing the cooking." ☒