

Across the Northline . . .

The day would end in a deafening crescendo of rock and roll at the Railway but it began gently enough. I turned up at Winchester University's new sparkling edifice to find a band on the road unloading the back of the transit. They were looking for a pedal steel and a guitar buried deep amongst the drum set, keyboard, amps and guitars.

It reminded me of the back cover of Zappa's *Freak Out*, Chuck Prophet with a trilby cocked high on his head of orange hair he was every inch, an on tour rock n' roll star. From his waistcoat to a rattlesnake tie loosed around his neck, down to a pair of drain pipe jeans set off by silver lame trainers, he looked like he just stepped out of a poker game with Tom Waits.

Students passed by in a haze of i-pods, hands to their ears clung to the umbilical chord of their mobile phones; probably headed for creative, media or fashion lectures in this snazzy temple of learning. What they missed this afternoon was the chance to hear a writer talking to the beat of a different drum. Willy Vlautin is a songwriter turned novelist and he's brought Paul Brainard to play pedal steel and trumpet during the reading.

Willy Vlautin's book reading reminded me of *Big Fish* meets Bukowski by way of Townes gambling in the back room of a Cowboy Junkies song. Vlautin's little girl lost, Alison Johnson, falls for the wrong guys, at the wrong time, on the wrong side of the tracks in Reno. How she finds redemption or doesn't is what I'm turning the pages to discover.

The three pieces Willy Vlautin read were graced by the exquisite pedal steel of Paul Brainard. He had a touch like gossamer across those strings. Between the readings the pair played the soundtrack of tunes which come with the novel. Vlautin stroking chords from an acoustic guitar, Brainard playing lazy day in the sun pedal steel and standing up for one tune to play muted trumpet that trembled the hushed air of the hall.

The tunes had cracking titles Paul Newman Makes The Night and Doc Holidays (after a rough house Reno bar).

Answering questions at the end Willy Vlautin explained that *Northline* is the



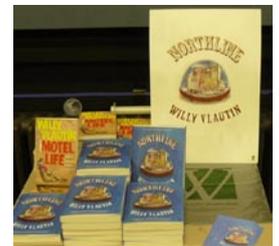
Willy Vlautin reads *Northline* at Winchester University with Paul Brainard pedal steel

kind of place that guys you meet in bars are always going to go to escape the crap in their lives but never do. He explained that his heroine Alison Johnson was based on the life experiences of his grandmother, his mother and himself.

While he was setting up I had called over to ask "What happens to the girl?" "Oh she does allright in the end, I think . . ." he smiled.

I had enough folding stuff for a book or a CD tonight so I waited till the gig. An afternoon on the river made my mind up and I've been reading the book with the CD playing since last night.

It was a barely attended event and I guess the students and tutors were off exploring some fundamental question of life which Chuck Prophet would duly answer for them that evening. No matter it was a gem of a gig and I'm glad I got to be there.



www.willyvlautin.com

After the reading I detoured down to Shawford and walked up the river, a Ray Wylie Hubbard 'Buddha like' calm came over me and the music which had painted these road tales of Reno fitted this sunny afternoon to a t . . .



The Whip Of A 'Gator's Tail

Whether you're at the Railway or Sixth Street Austin, scuzzy bars have the best music. Oliver Gray wears a Maggie Mae's t-shirt tonight, Birgit Gray stamps my hand. There's licorice allsorts on the table, there's an SXSC gig going down.

Willy Vlautin and Paul Brainard play a cracker set of songs littered with characters and road tales. The crowd whoop them on all the way. In the break I went and got myself Vlautin's book, Northline, then managed to squeeze back down front to be right in the flight path of Chuck Prophet and the Mission Express.

It was a whang dang in yer face set of songs the band hitting a groove and staying right on it. I thought back to all them i-podded students at the university this afternoon divorced from scuzzy back bar soul drenched rock 'n roll. That's no way to get an education.

Chuck Prophet dedicated his corking a wop a dop a wop boom bang You Did to them. All night he leaned and lurched into the mike wired for song and he lashed razored chords and licks with all the whip of a 'gator's tail.

They'd played to well near the witching hour and at the end I felt as drained as the band wiping the sweat from their faces. It was James Brown at the Apollo, it came all the way up from Muscle Shoals to Memphis and there was time for California peach romantic songs like After The Rain. It was the real deal, the mark of Oliver and Richard's gigs. The packed house loved it. Keep 'em coming.

www.sxsc.co.uk

www.chuckprophet.com

