



## Big Screen Classics

# Candy Mountain

### Candy Mountain

**Directors:** Robert Frank, Rudy Wurlitzer  
**Production Companies:** Xanadu Films, Les Films Plain-Chant, Films Vision 4, George Reinhart Productions, TS Productions, Milena Poylo, Télévision Suisse, Films A2  
**With the participation of:** Département Fédéral de l'Intérieur (Switzerland), Ministère Français de la Culture  
**Executive Producer:** Gérald Dearing  
**Producer:** Ruth Waldburger  
**Co-producers:** Philippe Diaz, Claude Bonin, Suzanne Hénaut  
**Associate Producer:** Tom Rothman  
**Production Manager (NY):** Philippe D'Arbanville  
**Production Manager (Canada):** Marcelle Gibson  
**Production Co-ordinator (Canada):** Nicole Bernier  
**Production Office Co-ordinator (NY):** Jennifer Kelly  
**Production Office Co-ordinator (Canada):** Leslie Jones  
**Location Unit Manager (NY):** K.C. Schulberg  
**Production Assistants (NY):** Tom Jarmusch, Stewart Day, Drew Emerson  
**Production Assistants (Canada):** Lorette LeBlanc, Chuck Clark, David Coole  
**Assistant Directors:** Richard Garber, Alain Klarer, Lydie Mahias  
**Casting (US):** Risa Bramon, Billy Hopkins, Heidi Levitt  
**Casting (Canada):** Gail Carr  
**Screenplay:** Robert Frank, Rudy Wurlitzer  
**Director of Photography:** Pio Corradi  
**Assistant Photographer:** Patrick Lindenmaier  
**Special Effects:** Jacques Godbout  
**Editor:** Jennifer Augé  
**Art Director (NY):** Brad Ricker  
**Art Director (Canada):** Keith Currie  
**Costumes:** Carol Wood  
**Make-up:** Laurence Azouvy  
**Music:** Dr John, David Johansen, Leon Redbone, Rita MacNeil, Tom Waits, Joey Barron, Mark Bingham, Michael Blair, Ralph Carney, Crispin Cioe, Greg Cohen, Killer Joe, Ralph Dillon, Bob Funk, Tony Garnier, Arno Hecht, Brian Koonan, Arto Lindsay, Paul Litteral, Tony Machine, Magic Dick, Steve Morrell, Marc Ribot, Fernando Saunders, John Saunders, John Scofield, Chris Spedding, Peter Stampfel, Kevin Tooley  
**Music Supervisor:** Hal Willner  
**Music Co-ordinators:** Hal Willner, John Telfer  
**Sound Recording:** David Joliat  
**Sound Re-recording:** Dominique Dalmasso  
**Sound Editor:** François Gédigier  
**Sound Effects:** Jonathan Liebling  
**Cast:**  
Kevin J. O'Connor (*Julius*)  
Harris Yulin (*Elmore Silk*)  
Tom Waits (*Al Silk*)  
Bulle Ogier (*Cornelia*)  
Roberts Blossom (*Archib*)  
Leon Redbone (*Huey*)  
Dr John (*Henry*)  
Rita MacNeil (*Winnie*)  
Joe Strummer (*Mario*)  
Laurie Metcalf (*Alice*)  
Jayne Eastwood (*Lucille*)  
Kazuko Oshima (*Koko*)  
Eric Mitchell (*Gunther*)  
Mary Joy, Bob Joy (*couple*)  
Arto Lindsay (*Alston*)  
Mary Margaret O'Hara (*Darlene*)  
David Johansen (*Keith Burns*)  
David Margulies (*lawyer*)

Beginning in New York City before meandering to Canada, *Candy Mountain* follows a musician (Kevin J. O'Connor) whose ambition leads him to feign an association with the J.D. Salinger of guitar-making, a reclusive master of the craft. Robert Frank was primarily a photographer, but he'd directed *Pull My Daisy* (1959) with Jack Kerouac, among other films; Wurlitzer's screenplays included *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971). Emphasising the film's countercultural sensibility and emphasis on prizing artistic integrity over financial reward, there are cameos by Tom Waits, Dr John, David Johansen, Leon Redbone, Mary Margaret O'Hara and 'Arto' Lindsay. *Candy Mountain* deserves far greater exposure. For me, it's the ultimate road movie and something of an obsession. I named my son after its writer.

Jason Wood, *Sight and Sound*, September 2025

### A contemporary review

'Life ain't no candy mountain,' says the kindly van driver who offers Candide/Julius his first lift down the road, a cracker-barrel sage who demonstrates the truth of his own dictum that you have to take the rough with the smooth by suddenly demanding a \$50 reward for his act of charity. This, in other words, is another trip down the well-worn road-movie trail where disillusionment for dreams and aspirations lies in wait just over the rainbow.

Though handled throughout with the offbeat, eccentric eye one associates with both Robert Frank and Rudy Wurlitzer (we first meet Julius trying to reclaim his guitar from a uniformed security cop, who comes on like a ferocious mugger in defending his borrowed treasure at gunpoint), it looks as though *Candy Mountain* is going to settle for the usual cautionary tale about fame, fortune and the bleak vistas of the world of pop. Julius' first two encounters, with Elmore Silk's brother and son-in-law, musicians both, are certainly pointed enough: one a star left high and dry on a pinnacle of achievement (a wonderfully acerbic portrait of aimless disenchantment from Tom Waits), rattling around like a wayward pinball in the luxurious wastes of his home, trying to sidetrack his boredom with drink and golf on the lawn; the other a loser, his wheelchair equally haphazardly driven by raging resentments at the riches which are giving his trailer-park junkyard the go-by.

Crucial to Julius' odyssey, however, is his laconically inconsequential encounter, on a lonely, snowy road somewhere across the Canadian border, with a very old man, out for a constitutional and glad of a lift for the rest of his short way home. His tranquil presence and patriarchal mien, complete to the white fringe whiskers of Victorian days, might suggest a symbol of stability, of roots sent down deep and firm into the earth over which Julius is drifting. The patriarchal aspect is rather knocked on the head when Julius makes conversation by asking if he has any children. 'Nope,' the old man grins, 'Not as yet...' Instead, oddly, he sets one dreaming of the world of Herman Melville, and one would scarcely be surprised to hear him say, 'Call me Ishmael,' or launch into one of Father Mapple's sermons.

Irrelevant to the action, over in a minute or two, this sequence nevertheless adds a dimension to the film: not precisely a sense of the past, but a shift away from the present into a kind of timelessness of other values. And looking back

Tony 'Machine' Krasinski (*musician*)  
Susan J. Kirschner (*Suzie*)  
Dee De Antonio (*Lou Sultan*)  
José Soto (*musician's son*)  
Bob Maroff (*gas station attendant*)  
Rockets Redglare (*van driver*)  
Nancy Fish (*maid*)  
Liz Porrazzo (*Lola*)  
Harry Fox (*gas-station owner*)  
Roy MacEachern (*customs officer*)  
Wayne Robson (*Buddy Burke*)  
Eric House (*doctor*)  
Rosalee Larade (*1st kid*)  
John Simon Beaton (*2nd kid*)  
Norman Rankin (*3rd kid*)  
Stanley MacNeil (*school-bus driver*)  
Tantoo Cardinal (*Annie*)  
Jo-Ann Rolls (*Molly*)  
Ralph Dillon (*musician*)  
Switzerland-France-Canada 1987  
92 mins  
Digital

The screening on Wed 1 Jul will be introduced by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director for Public Programmes and Audiences

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from it, one begins to see in a different light some, at least, of the rip-offs to which Julius has been subjected. The garage man who settles for \$175 when Julius (lying) pleads that the asking price of \$200 is all the money he has, is probably moved by a spirit of generosity; so too, perhaps – who knows? – is Al Silk in capriciously selling him a car surely worth more than the \$1,000 he asks for out of the \$2,000 Julius confesses to having. From this point on, Julius' journey becomes part *éducation sentimentale*, part involuntary intrusion into the secret places of other people's lives, and part mystical experience whose mystique he never quite fathoms. At the end, standing on the bleak, windswept cliffs overlooking the Atlantic, watching in mingled exhilaration and dispossession as Elmore burns his guitars, Julius is a sadder man, perhaps even a wiser one, but still a wanderer in the dark.

What he fails to read, as he doggedly follows in Elmore's footsteps, are the signs (often embedded in the songs on the soundtrack) pointing to the trail of bitterness and betrayal Elmore left in passing. Once more caught up with, once more preparing to move on, Elmore is assumed by the Japanese businesswoman (not to mention Julius himself) to have accepted her lifetime security deal so that he can 'be a free man on the open road'. Ever the anti-romantic, Elmore is quick to set the record straight: 'I say freedom don't have much to do with the road, one way or the other.' He is in fact more accurately defined by the song associated with him: 'The devil jumped a hawk and made him too nervous to fly/All that hawk could do was lay down and cry.' Contrariwise, Elmore listens, with wistful envy, as the ebullient Rita MacNeil sings in a local club: 'You will meet the hands that give, the ones that take/Everybody needs a place to keep them warm, to keep them safe.'

Elmore, in other words, is a hawk jumped by the devil of success, henceforward assailed by demands (from commercial interests, from people who love him) which he is unwilling, or possibly constitutionally unable, to respond to. Akin in a sense to Graham Greene's burnt-out case (the contract by which he escapes, skyrocketing the value of his guitars by guaranteeing their rarity, is tantamount to a certification of his own death), he can only keep on running. With Julius acting as his own Homer, committing a series of messages for Elmore to a pocket tape-recorder and interweaving them with flights of fancy about his own heroic expectations, his odyssey is a delight in several ways: the marvellous string of performances achieved through unorthodox casting that slyly incorporates a whole slew of musicians; the brilliance with which Frank and Wurlitzer ring the visual and verbal changes on the encounters – inconsequential, enigmatic, emotionally charged or simply bizarre – littering Julius' path; and, not least, the complexity with which the music is interwoven from background to foreground and back again until it becomes a protagonist in its own right. *Candy Mountain* may perhaps be summed up (in Robert Frank's words) as the story of a young man who 'realises he will have to make his own way through life'. But its parts are always much more than this sum.

Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1990