

His sad stories didn't sell, nor did his music. Willy Vlautin persevered

Sunday, April 22, 2007
JEFF BAKER

FACTBOX

• [Willy Vlautin Age: 39](#)

On a rainy Monday afternoon at Portland Meadows, Willy Vlautin is checking the numbers before the third race. He wants to know which horses started fast in their previous race, key information at a track that's always muddy. "Everybody bets on the hot jockey," he says, "but with quarter horses you just can't tell." He's up almost \$20 already after hitting an exacta, and he'll take a shot at another.

It doesn't come in. Vlautin doesn't mind. He loves Portland Meadows, a place that feels more like northern Nevada than North Portland and is home away from home to a guy from Reno. The older crowd smokes and gambles and gossips about which jockey might be using a buzzer and when the track might be sold and turned into a discount hotel or a big-box retailer. (The over-under is two years.) There's a race every half-hour or so, and those who can't wait that long can wager off-track at Tampa Downs or Philly Park or a track somewhere else in the world.

"What I like about this place is nobody bothers you," Vlautin says. "Everyone minds their own business and you get all races and ages mingling together. It's like a library."

The only books here are the ones Vlautin writes on the sticky tables upstairs, scratching out sad stories in a black notebook. He's been doing it for years, writing about down-and-outers who drink in cheap bars and work odd jobs and drive across the desert, not sure where they're going or how they'll get ahead. Sometimes his stories become songs that he sings with his band, Richmond Fontaine, and sometimes they become novels that he works over and over until he gets them just right.

Persistence, always

"My only talent is perseverance," he says. "I'm the guy who always shows up for practice, ready to go. I won't give up."

Vlautin didn't give up when Richmond Fontaine didn't find an American audience, and now the band is a success in Europe, touring steadily and seeing its albums called masterpieces in English-music magazines. He didn't give up when his fiction appeared only in small literary magazines, and now his first novel, "The Motel Life" (HarperPerennial, \$13.95 paperback, 240 pages), is being published in seven countries. The movie rights have been sold to Guillermo Arriaga, who wrote "Babel" and "21 Grams."

Vlautin says Arriaga is "the nicest guy in the world." He says that about lots of people, and they say it about him. He is transparent in his emotions, like the characters in his songs and books, and wears his heart on a rolled-up denim sleeve.

"Very earnest and very sincere and very sweet," says Chuck Palahniuk, a Portland writer who met Vlautin at a cocktail party at the American Embassy in Paris. "Maybe it's a Reno, Nevada, thing, but it's nice to see it."

Reno's not such a nice place sometimes, and Vlautin's friendly disposition is the flip side to a dark body of work. One of Vlautin's unpublished novels is about a guy who sits in the bathtub, reading and drinking beer and thinking about killing himself. "The Motel Life" opens with a man running over a boy on a bicycle in a snowstorm and has a teenage prostitute and an attempted suicide and a

gambler who can't quit when he's ahead. Richmond Fontaine has made seven albums, and there's not a happy song on any of them.

I've tried, but I just can't do it," Vlautin says. "I wrote one for Twyla (Beckner, a jockey at Portland Meadows), but it was an instrumental. I've always had those feelings, going back to when I was a kid, and I guess that's why my stuff's so dark."

A shy barfly

Vlautin was "painfully shy, extremely shy and anxious" as a child growing up in Reno. He could barely walk down the hall at school, couldn't introduce himself to strangers and had trouble shopping in stores because he thought people were judging him, checking what kind of toilet paper he was buying. Music was his only friend and he fell hard for Tom Waits and Willie Nelson and the alt-country bands of the 1980s, the Blasters and X and the Long Ryders and Green on Red. He liked edgier stuff, too, the Replacements and Husker Du and Bruce Springsteen's "Nebraska." He got a guitar and learned to play and dreamed about having an album in the store with all the other great albums.

When he was 18 or so, he started going to what he called "Old man bars. I had no confidence at all, and it would comfort me the most. I had fake ID, and I would sit there and not feel like such a bum. I've always been attracted to the darker places." A kid with fake ID in a bar in Reno doesn't just sit there. Vlautin drank. There was plenty of drinking in his family, and it took the edge off and made him a little more social. He still drinks but backed off awhile ago when he thought it was affecting his performances with Richmond Fontaine; he thinks he pretty much has it under control.

Vlautin started trying to write songs when he was 13, and it wasn't until he was 26 that he wrote one that he didn't immediately want to throw in the garbage. He wrote about Reno, the city he "fell in love with like you fall in love with a girl" and fell just as hard for a writer from Oregon, Raymond Carver.

"When I read Carver my whole life changed," Vlautin writes in an e-mail. "I can't tell you enough how much he meant to me. It wasn't even a week after finishing that book that I began writing stories. I'd write one after another after another, and they were dark, really bleak, and I couldn't figure out why. My songs at that point weren't that dark. But when I wrote stories the darkness just sorta spilled out of me. Carver and writing stories really did change my life. For a while it about did me in, but in the end working on stories and finding writers like Carver saved my life."

Moving to Portland

Getting out of Reno helped, too. Vlautin was in bands and loved to go see live music. One night Crackerbash, a Portland punk trio, came to Reno and Vlautin was at the show. Two girls got in a fight and singer Sean Croghan stopped the show and said the band didn't believe in violence. Vlautin was so impressed that he wanted to go to a place where people were that cool; he moved to Portland with a girl he didn't like, just to get to town.

Vlautin formed Richmond Fontaine with bass player and fellow Replacements fan Dave Harding. (The name comes from a guy who helped Harding out of some car trouble on a Mexican vacation.) A lineup change or two later, the band solidified with drummer Sean Oldham and guitarist Dan Eccles. Vlautin writes the songs, although nobody's sure how it happens.

"Willy sits at home playing guitar all day and watching 'Matlock,' " Oldham writes in an e-mail. "He has the complete series on VHS. Somehow these turn into songs that are already great. We like to mess with them a little just to feel like we contribute."

Richmond Fontaine was getting gigs opening for some of its heroes, including X and the Blasters, and recording albums of Vlautin's dark songs, but it wasn't breaking nationally and getting in a van for another Midwest tour was losing its appeal. "Our U.S. fans are diehards and we love them," Oldham said. "I just wish they would all move to the same city."

Chris Metzler, a Portland resident who's worked in the music business in London for almost 20 years, saw the band play a wedding and "clear the dance floor because they weren't doing the covers routine." He thought its fifth album, "Post to Wire," was "amazing: dark, yet musically positive," and sent it to European labels. When everyone turned it down, he released it himself, and the British music press went wild. Uncut magazine called it "a dark, mesmerizing masterpiece," and Mojo said it was "the season's must-have Americana purchase."

European success

Metzler became Richmond Fontaine's manager and helped the band go from selling 150 albums in Europe to more than 30,000. The next album, "The Fitzgerald," got even better reviews ("absolute perfection," "bleak but brilliant") and the band began touring Europe at least twice a year.

"They sell equally now in many places to the likes of the Decemberists, who are much bigger in the states," Metzler writes in an e-mail. "European fans tend to really listen more to the band's lyrics and that's why they have done so well here. I often have American acts complain that in the U.S. drinking comes first and the music second at live gigs."

Back at Portland Meadows, Vlautin has the dates on Richmond Fontaine's upcoming European tour, its second this year, pasted in the front of his notebook. The band's new album, "Thirteen Cities," has been out over there for months and will be released here May 22. He's got another novel, "Northline," under contract and wonders whether he'll be spoiled by success. "Now that my ship's coming in a little bit, I hope I don't mess it up," he says.

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