

How to entertain the good old goys

Clark Collis meets wise-cracking Kinky Friedman, Jewish country singer turned witty crime writer

American literature has long accepted the idea that writers are allowed to turn up as characters in their own works of fiction. Few have explored that concept quite so thoroughly as Kinky Friedman, a Jewish country singer and reformed cocaine addict who writes detective stories about a Jewish country singer and reformed cocaine addict called Kinky Friedman. Friedman's old pet cat also frequently turns up in his books, as do his friends, including the country singer Willie Nelson.

"I think I snorted the line between fact and fiction a good few years ago," the 55-year-old chortles from beneath his stetson.

Despite such an offbeat premise, Friedman's books have proved "a financial pleasure for the Kinkster", with his 13th novel, *The Mile High Club* (Faber), looking like it might be his most pleasurable to date. Ironically, his fame as a novelist means that he now performs to far more people than he did during his days as country music's most satirically-minded *enfant terrible*. The itinerary of his current European tour — which finds him mixing up

readings, jokes and Friedman standards such as *They Ain't Makin' Jews Like Jesus Anymore* — wouldn't shame most rock acts. He is playing in the UK and Scandinavia, but not, for once, his beloved Germany.

"The Germans are my second-favourite people," Friedman deadpans through the fug of his king-sized cigar. "Of course, my first is everybody else."

Born in Chicago but raised in Texas, Friedman knew what he wanted to do from the moment he heard his first Hank Williams record.

"My dream was to be a country singer," Friedman recalls. "And I've always said that if that's your dream as a child you'll end up a best-selling novelist."

As it happened, the singer temporarily abandoned his performing ambitions in the mid-Sixties in favour of joining the Peace Corps, which sent him to Borneo. While Friedman enjoyed the experience he clearly harbours doubts about how much help he was to the indigenous population.

"I was inspired by JFK," he says. "I wanted to do good. But I was basically teaching farming to people who had been quite successfully doing



Partying: the late John Belushi and Friedman in 1978

it for 2,000 years. I felt pretty useless. My major accomplishment was showing the natives how to play frisbee. Of course, some of them stole the frisbees and used them to make their lips big, which set my programme back."

Returning to America in the late Sixties, Friedman decided to try to fulfil those childhood dreams of stardom and, together with his band the Texas Jewboys, recorded a series of albums that combined authentic country music with a scabrous sense of humour that went out of its

way to lampoon Nashville's conservative values.

Unfortunately, despite attracting famous fans such as Bob Dylan and Ringo Starr, the populace at large proved immune to the charms of songs such as *Get Your Biscuits in the Oven* and *Your Buns in the Bed* or *Rapid City, South Dakota* ("Country music's first pro-choice song. Hell, country music's only pro-choice song."). Nor were Friedman's career prospects helped by the fact that he had become a serious drug user.

"I've spent millions on cocaine," he says. "And it just

makes me so depressed. But I believe that you've got to find what you like and let it kill you. The cocaine part of my life is why I appreciate lighting this cigar."

That period ended in 1985 when Friedman abandoned the drug for good and, with his musical career going nowhere, decided to try his hand at novel writing. The result was *Greenwich Killing Time*, which introduced both Kinky-the-sleuth and his hard-drinking, cigar-smoking, wisecracking ways.

Since then Friedman has averaged a book a year. *The Mile High Club* is as good as any he has written, featuring a plot that Friedman's beloved Conan Doyle would be proud of plus all manner of witticisms and wordplays, starting with the very first line. ("If there's one thing I hate," I said to the beautiful woman on the airplane, "it's meeting a beautiful woman on an airplane.")

"I'm selling a lot of books these days," he says. "Killing a lot of trees. And I've finished two more, *Stepping on a Rainbow* and *Meanwhile Back at the Ranch*. After that if I write another one it will be a literary suicide. Right now

I'm writing a non-fiction thing called *Kinky Friedman's Guide to Texas Etiquette*. It's pretty short, about the same length as *Black Yachtsman I Have Known*."

Friedman may even be about to get his due as a songwriter thanks to a tribute album called *Pearls in the Snow*, which finds the likes of Tom Waits, Lyle Lovett, Dwight Yoakam and Kinky himself tackling highlights from his back catalogue.

"The one person who gave us a firm turndown was kd lang," Friedman sighs. "We suggested that she do *Get Your Biscuits in the Oven* and *Your Buns in the Bed*. But she didn't want anything to do with it. I don't know, though, if this creates a reawakening of interest in my music then it could be a problem. I'm only a step away from the Shalom Retirement Village right now. Also, I'm real ambivalent about being a performer. I've come to realise that anyone who uses the word 'ambivalent' should never have been a country singer."

□ Kinky Friedman tours the UK until Nov 17.
www.kinkyfriedman.com

Kinky Collis Telegraph

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