

Interview: J.K. Simmons Explains Why ‘The Music Never Stopped’

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CHICAGO – If you’re not familiar with the name J.K. Simmons, you almost certainly know his face or maybe even just his voice. From “Oz” to “Juno” to “The Closer” to “Portal 2” and even the M&Ms commercials, the very-talented actor has been everywhere in the last few decades. The great character actor recently took time out of his busy schedule to give a call to HollywoodChicago.com on the eve of the release of his excellent drama “The Music Never Stopped” on DVD. The sentimental story of a man bonding with his brain-damaged son (Lou Taylor Pucci) through the music of his generation (The Grateful Dead, Bob Dylan, etc.) wasn’t given nearly the theatrical run it should but will hopefully find a strong life on DVD.

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the more interesting elements of the film is that it seems to me to be a personal story that’s also about a time and era of music where it was more of an important part of the cultural fabric, when it was really changing things with artists like Bob Dylan and The Grateful Dead. Why do you think that’s changed? Why don’t we have a Bob Dylan now or do we and no one’s paying attention?

J.K. SIMMONS: I frankly don’t know if we do because I’m not paying attention. [Laughs.] Although that’s going to change because my kids are coming of age and we’re about to slam into the wall of puberty and adolescence. I think that certainly one aspect of it was the classic generation gap that so many people were feeling in the ’60s. The War in Vietnam was the ONE really polarizing thing that went along with that whole love-child-hippie thing that spawned bands like the Dead. It’s definitely true in my life that there was a level of community — the music was something that brought us together. One of the elements is the fact that listening to music...ever since the Walkman in the ’80s and now everyone with little white things hanging out of their ears...oftentimes music, rather than being a force that brings people together, is a force that people use to isolate and oftentimes alienate.



J.K. Simmons

Photo credit: Lionsgate

HollywoodChicago.com: What kind of music do you listen to? Were you a fan of the Dead?

SIMMONS: I must be perfectly honest. The first thing I learned to play on the guitar was “Blowin’ in the Wind” but I was not a big Dead-head growing up. I heard the Dead a lot under my sister’s bedroom door. When I started getting into having my own albums and my own music it was Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, The Beatles — I was a little bit too much of a musical purist at the time to appreciate the vibe of the Dead. Frankly, they’re not the “tightest” band in the history of rock ‘n’ roll. My sister and I would have the conversation like Henry and Gabriel have — “They play what’s in the air.” There’s a vibe to the Dead that is undeniable and unique and brilliant. I developed that appreciation. And got to meet a couple of them at Sundance.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did your sister see the movie?

SIMMONS: Yeah, yeah. She was first in line when it had its brief run in Seattle. Like so many of these things I’ve done in the last decade, it’s one of those that I wish more people had been given the chance to see. But there’s DVD.

J.K. Simmons
Photo credit: Lionsgate

HollywoodChicago.com: I was going to ask you about that. At its widest, “The Music Never Stopped” was on 32 screens. Is that the kind of thing that upsets you when you put so much into a movie or can you not worry about that?

SIMMONS: I don’t want to say upset but it’s disappointing. People that saw the film...it resonated with people who were able to see it at

Sundance. It felt like a similar way...there were similarly intelligent and emotional responses from people like what I got from “Juno.” I’m not comparing the films directly. They’re very different. But there was a guy at Sundance when we were doing screenings and Q&As and there was a guy that came backstage and waited around and told me that he couldn’t be at the Q&A because as soon as the end credits were done I HAD to walk outside and call my son. I thought that I did my job right there. It’s the “Juno” effect — about that film opening up a dialogue between teenagers and parents. Especially for guys of my generation — I felt like that opened doors of communication.

HollywoodChicago.com: For this critic, it’s frustrating when something like this can’t find a wider release compared to the junk that does.

SIMMONS: I long ago decided that I would never get into producing, writing, or any other aspect of show business but it is frustrating that more people don’t see it. Try to look at the silver lining that people will see it on DVD and that’s better than people not seeing it at all.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you do any research into music therapy or visit with any patients or did you just approach your character?

SIMMONS: I did just my character. Lou Pucci has the heavy lifting and he researched his butt off and he spent time with therapists and patients. After Lou came on-board, most of my research was just hanging out with Lou and bonding. We hit it off right away. You can tell pretty quickly whether an actor’s head and heart are in the right place. We were real simpatico. The scientific research — the onus was not on me. My character is sort of bewildered [about it]. I sort of embraced that.

HollywoodChicago.com: The father-son dynamic is key to the film’s success.

SIMMONS: Absolutely. You know, as I was reading the script for the first time, I got a third of the way into it and thought “This is going to be one of those movies where mom rides to the rescue and saves the whole thing and brings the family together.” It was gratifying to see the way the film DOES develop. Each of the parents are working hard and trying to repair their devastating family. The script blew me out of the water.

HollywoodChicago.com: It doesn’t follow the traditional sentimental arc.

SIMMONS: When I find that a script is really hard to come up with a logline for or come up with a genre for that’s a really good sign. It doesn’t fit into a mold. In many ways, it’s a fairly traditional film but it’s a really good story.

HollywoodChicago.com: Right. You seem to like to work with people who I would say take traditional film genres and spin them a bit — Jason Reitman and the Coen brothers both being good examples of that.

SIMMONS: Those are two great examples.



J.K. Simmons

Photo credit: Lionsgate

HollywoodChicago.com: Are those the kind of directors where your relationship is strong enough that you would sign on to anything script unseen if they called?

SIMMONS: Yep. Absolutely. If it was Jason, the brothers, Sam Raimi — I’ll do it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Anybody else?

SIMMONS: There are some in TV-land. Tom Fontana. James Duff, the guy I’m working with now on “The Closer.” I agreed to doing “The Closer” without seeing a script because I had done a short-lived series with him and he wrote the character for me. With Jason, he wants to keep the string intact because he thinks I’m kind of good-luck charm for him so I did a tiny little voiceover part in “Young Adult.” There’s a little part for me in his next movie too. He said that there’s always a part and it might be nice and juicy or something small.

HollywoodChicago.com: I love when people work together repeatedly — it implies creative confidence and continuity.

SIMMONS: Right. And one of the things that’s so...God, I was going to say “awesome”...but it is...awesome things about Jason is that he’s not a director out there making the same movie over and over again. This will continue to be the case. He’s taking chances with “Young Adult.” As is Diablo [Cody].



J.K. Simmons
Photo credit: TNT

HollywoodChicago.com: How much are you going to miss “The Closer”?

SIMMONS: It’s always sort of bittersweet but we’ve got another four months or so to go. I’m not really feeling the end yet. Not feeling those pangs. You do something for seven years and it can’t help but run the risk of being a little bit tedious but our writers have kept this from becoming boring seven years later. It’s remarkable. It’s a family. You get used to going to work where you know the guy’s names on the crew. It’s a real nice ensemble to be a part of. Frankly, I’ve been having my cake and eating it too. It’s a part-time job. It’s allowed me time to be a dad, a baseball coach, my other voiceover work and movies. It’s been, on every level, a great job for me. And to have it be something that continues to be pretty fun to do as an actor is great. And it pays the mortgage!

HollywoodChicago.com: People keep asking me why it’s ending.

SIMMONS: There really is going to be some kind of an eighth season since we’re shooting 21 episodes. There will be something on next year. I pay very little attention to show business other than what I’m doing but it is amazing to see our numbers as crazy-good as they are.

HollywoodChicago.com: It’s always surprising and I always respect seeing a show go off the air at the peak of its popularity.

SIMMONS: Yeah. And the same thing with “Oz.” With “Oz,” Tom just thought that he had done what he could do with the characters and he didn’t know if there were enough stories there. I think that was the case with Kyra [Sedgwick] and this. I don’t think she saw herself doing a TV show to begin with and then she fell in love with this character and really enjoyed the ride. When her seven years were up and it was her option to get out it was her desire to do something new.

HollywoodChicago.com: Has TV changed since you started doing it?

SIMMONS: I don’t pay enough attention to have a really intelligent answer to that. The three long-term TV things that I’ve done have been so different to begin with. “Oz” we shot each episode in seven days and never worked overtime. Half of us were still doing Broadway shows. Most shows shoot in 8 or 9 days for less running time and are always working overtime. “Oz” was bang-bang-bang naturalism. “Law & Order” was a well-oiled machine by the time I got there — that was traditional movie-making. “The Closer”...again, to be an original player in an

ensemble show that we were creating as we went along that first year in traditional cable-land and breaking records there...

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve had a great run in TV. If someone came to you tomorrow and said “Would you commit to another show for six or seven years” are you interested or do you want some time off from it?

SIMMONS: If it was the right thing. There are more and more criteria that I need filled now. It’s still largely about the quality of the script — James Duff or Tom Fontana then I would love to. But I’ve got a life here. It would have to be in L.A. I wouldn’t want to do a show where I was working as hard as Kyra on “The Closer.” It would be fun to go do a half-hour. Something different. Play some trailer-park guy. [Laughs.]

“The Music Never Stopped” stars J.K. Simmons, Lou Taylor Pucci, and Julia Ormond. It was released on DVD on August 2nd, 2011. “The Closer” airs Monday nights on TNT.



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