

## Interview: Actor Oscar Isaac Goes Deep ‘Inside Llewyn Davis’

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CHICAGO – One of more memorable performances of 2013 is from an actor who has been a bit under the radar – Oscar Isaac. After character parts in several familiar films, like “The Nativity Story,” “Sucker Punch” and “The Bourne Legacy,” Isaac steps out as the lead in the new Coen Brothers film, “Inside Llewyn Davis.”

The Guatemalan born actor grew up in Miami, and graduated from the Julliard School in New York City – in the same class as Jessica Chastain. He also played guitar and sang lead vocals in a band, which prepared him well for his role as folk singer Llewyn Davis. He has moved up the movie star chain after landing his first role as Joseph in “The Nativity Story” (2006), and has worked steady as a movie actor ever since.



Oscar Isaac and his Feline Companion in ‘Inside Llewyn Davis’  
*Photo credit: CBS Films*

“Inside Llewyn Davis” is the 16th remarkable film of the Coen Brothers (Joel & Ethan). Set in 1961 New York City during the folk music scene in Greenwich Village, the film is a holy journey of the title character to find his place in a music career sense, and his morality as a human being. Isaac is defining in his performance, giving Llewyn a persona of defeat while in the midst of searching for victory.

HollywoodChicago.com spoke to Oscar Isaac in a roundtable with two other media outlets, and the bright and witty Isaac remarked on his career fortunes.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** On one side of this film, there was a burgeoning music revolution, on the other side it was common people doing common things. In your opinion, how does a revolution affect our common lives, and how do our common lives affect a revolution?

**Oscar Isaac:** As far as a music revolution, vacuums get created – we’re in one now – and as T-Bone Burnett [music consultant on the film] has said, the middle class musician has been wiped out. We’re inundated with the new ‘open mike,’ which is the internet. When I was in bands it was the small studios era, with producers still doing their thing. That doesn’t exist anymore. In the film, the old hasn’t quite died, and the new hasn’t been born yet. It is in those vacuums that somebody comes along and lights a fire. That is Dylan, who synthesized what the [1950s] Beat Poets were doing and made something new.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How much of what Llewyn Davis goes through do you see as created by him internally, versus the external forces around him?

**Isaac:** Much of it is self created, but a lot of it is self created because of external reasons. That is the difference. Something bad happens, and he responds terribly to it, which creates another bad situation. And so on and so on. it’s a bit of both, I would say

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Obviously there are parallels to the real folk singer Dave Van Ronk, and his album ‘Inside Dave Van Ronk.’ Since the film is more of an artistic rendering of artists like Van Ronk, what do you think can be gained by expressing the life more intellectually and artistically rather than literally?

**Isaac:** We’re shackled less to historical accuracy, obviously, and we had a lot more room to take from all stuff and make something new with it. After I walked out of the audition room, they had to think for a month about whether they were making the film with me, because I’m not a 6 foot-3 inch-300 pound Swede [as Van Ronk was], and I don’t sing the way he sang. But I did read about him, learned his repertoire and watched videos of him. I wanted to capture the essence of him, because he was very direct about who he was. He’s a blue collar guy from the boroughs of New York, so that was very important.

It turned into something else as soon as I was cast. There were a couple lines about ‘howling.’ I don’t do that in my singing, but I thought I could. So when I showed up to T-Bone’s place, I figured there would be a ‘panel of experts’ to assess my skills – to break down my voice and teach me how to play. None of that ever happened, I was never told how to sing or play. I took the lead on that – I would learn to play like Van Ronk, but I would also try to play like me. They went with that, actually stripping more away than telling me what to do.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** One of the themes of the film is about being true to one’s self as an artist, and not selling out. Since the film business is just as difficult in the artist versus commercial reward sense, what does it feel like to you in that realm?

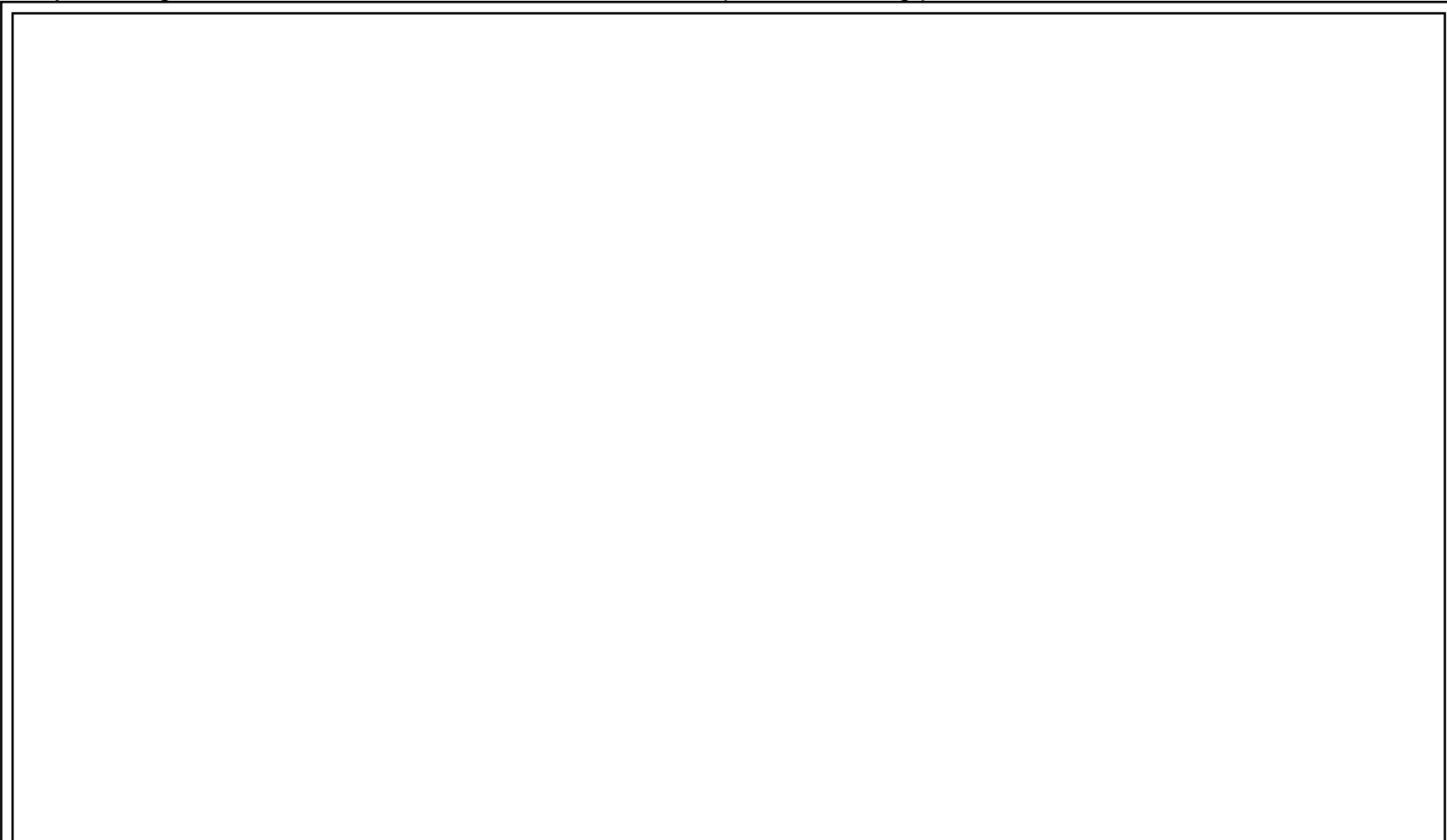
**Isaac:** This film is exactly the type of work that I’ve dreamed of, doing something like this. I compare this in an acting sense to the film ‘Dog Day Afternoon,’ which I bemoan as the type of film that is not made anymore. Even to get lead roles in more independent films is difficult, unless you mean something in the financial markets. So the fact that this came along, and the Coen Brothers could cast whoever they wanted, that is more than I could ever have wished for as a first leading role. Because it’s the type of movie that I love, and the Coen Brothers are my favorite filmmakers. It’s a total dream, both as an actor and a musician. It’s the opposite of Llewyn, because it’s exactly the right thing at the right time.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Now that you’ve gotten to know him a bit, what advice about life would Oscar Isaac give Llewyn Davis?

**Isaac:** I don’t have any advice, I’d like to get advice from him. [laughs] Because for better or worse, you see a man who is true to himself, and stays that way – sacrificing himself to an ideal. He’s also a bit of a hypocrite, because he’ll go and do a pop song for money. He still strives for that ideal, and there is something both tragic and heroic about that.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I’m curious about how the directors deliver the ‘Coen Brothers comedy.’ Is it all played straight, like the interactions with the cat in the film, or like a regular comedic movie set you are looking to crack everybody up?

**Isaac:** For me, whenever I thought in comedic terms, it wouldn’t work. But as soon as I played it in the most amount of pain, that’s when everyone laughed the most. Whenever I felt at the most desperate breaking point, that is when I heard the loudest cackles. [laughs]







Oscar Isaac and Justin Timberlake In-Studio for ‘Inside Llewyn Davis’  
*Photo credit: CBS Films*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** There is a great scene in which Llewyn interacts with a clueless military guy, who happens also to be a folk singer with a bit of success. Since this occurs all the time up and down the show business ladder, how does that feel to you in the fictional world of Llewyn and the reality of your own career?

**Isaac:** Yes, I do see people sometimes and think, how the heck did they make it? [laughs] That is what Llewyn feels, although he thinks he’s a pretty good musician. I’ve seen some reviews that focus on this element – they actually say that the song the military guy sings is better than Llewyn’s music. [laughs] That’s fair, because Llewyn is so unlikable – for example, how can he be so cruel to people who allow him to stay in their apartment. The fact that the Coens don’t pull any punches in that way is remarkable.

To get back to the original question, luck has a lot to do with it. The Coens recognize their luck, T-Bone recognizes his luck and I recognize it as well. I’ve been lucky to be able to do the thing I do, in a way it came about, and I know it doesn’t always happen that way.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The character of your sister in the film defines herself as just ‘existing,’ she doesn’t really understand show business. Do you think even in 2013, that there is a distance about what the general public understands about the entertainment industry?

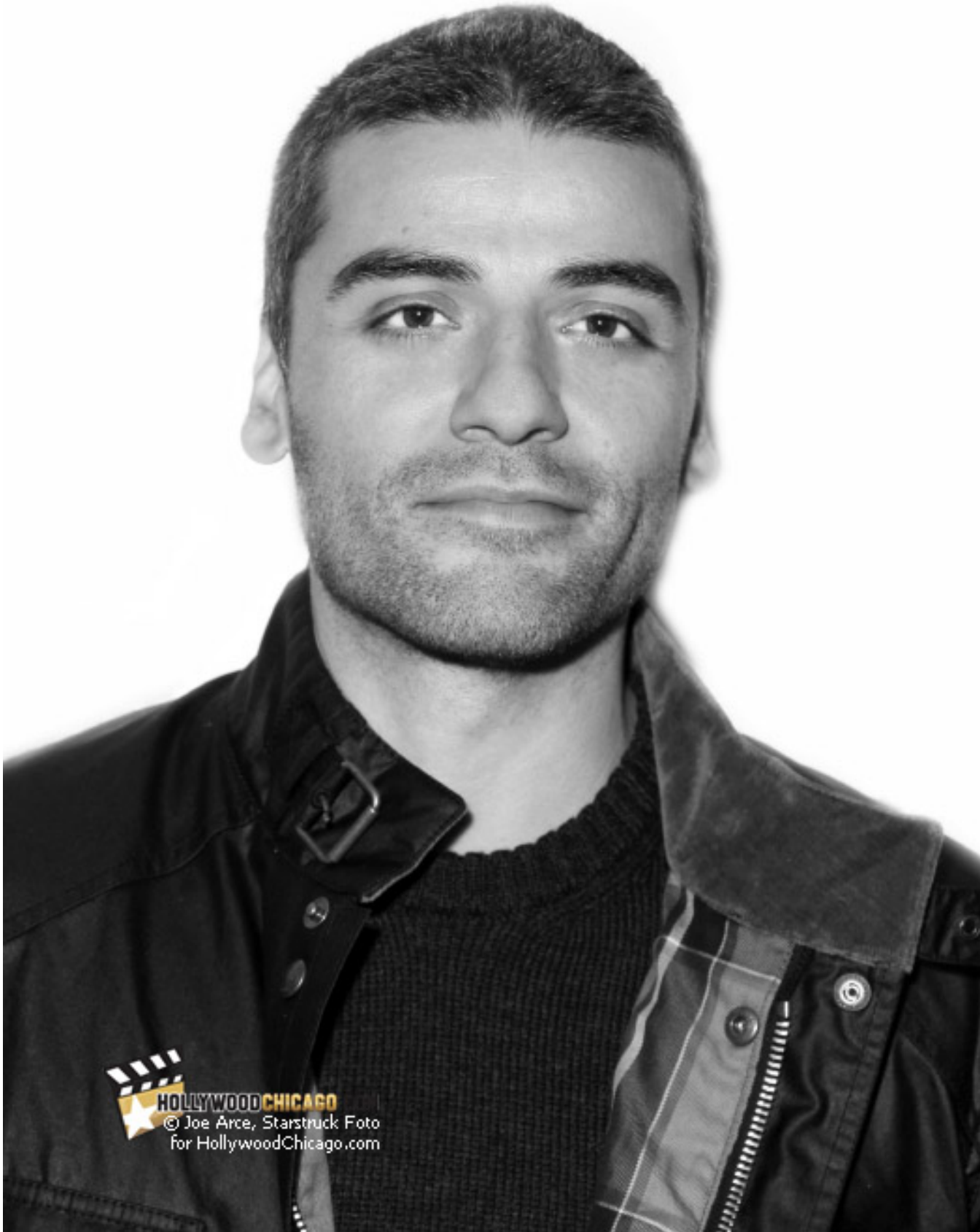
**Isaac:** Probably the outside world still sees it primarily as glamorous, since the luxury is always highlighted. It’s also a real slog as well. Actors are also fairly neurotic, and it’s clear where it comes from. Paranoia is when you think people are talking about you behind your back, but as performers we KNOW that people are talking about us behind our backs. [laughs] We go into a room, we leave, and we know we’ll be talked about. It’s like a petri dish for neuroses.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You really got an opportunity to indulge in folk music. What is it about that particular genre did you really connect to?

**Isaac:** There is a directness and simplicity about it that makes it perfectly suited to protest songs. T-Bone described the early American roots music in the 20th Century, when producers went to the poorest of the poor to do recordings of their songs, which was one of the most single democratizing acts in history. That is where all modern music has come from, and I think it’s true. It’s the fulfillment of, ‘the meek shall inherit the earth.’

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I was an advocate for the film ‘Sucker Punch,’ and was very much in the minority. What do you think most people don’t understand about that film?

**Isaac:** I question that you are in the minority. [laughs] It’s hard to understand reactions. I think it was written off because if there is one element of the film that is disliked, the tendency is to write off the whole film. That’s not fair, there is a lot of legitimate good work in the film. I understand that it didn’t totally work, but I think it’s also rare that you have something boldly so crazed and imaginative, for better or worst. It’s becoming a bit of a cult film.



Oscar Isaac at the Chicago International Film Festival in October, 2013  
*Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You played Jesus’s father Joseph in ‘The Nativity Story.’ Is the atmosphere on a biblical film more reserved, or is it even more anarchistic because of the subject matter?

**Isaac:** Definitely more anarchistic. [laughs] I approached the role like anything else, but obviously the story has its constraints. I played him as real a person as I could.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I’ve noticed in your upcoming filmography you’re working with more original screenplays and more writer/directors. Is that what you prefer?

**Isaac:** After this experience, not any more! [laughs] Seriously, it’s great because there is much more of a finished tone while you’re shooting. There are three steps to a movie – script, production and editing – and when I get a script that I believe can interest me throughout the entire shoot, that’s how I can pick a project, is there enough there to keep me curious?

Also, I see the value in great direction. You try a lot of sh\*t and you’re in the hands of someone who is responsible for tone, themes and context for character. You could be doing the best work of your life, but if somebody doesn’t know how to shoot it or doesn’t have a filmmaker’s instinct, then it’s pointless and a waste of time.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You went to Julliard with Jessica Chastain. Did you or she anticipate an explosion like this in your careers?

**Isaac:** Yes, of course. [laughs] It’s the goal, isn’t it? This is what we spent the 12 hours a day doing when were at that f\*\*king school, with the same people night after night. We hoped for the tools that would make us accelerate in our chosen careers. At the same time, no, you’re also assuming nothing like this could ever happen.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Did you have a back-up plan?

**Isaac:** Be a musician. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Of all the vintage cars and vehicles in the film, which was your favorite and why?

**Isaac:** The car that I drove most in, although I'm not a car buff and can't name the model. The dashboard was amazing, though, the old inside radios and knobs and stuff.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** W.C. Fields said never work with kids or animals. What relationship did you have with your cat co-star that was unique?

**Isaac:** We had four different cats, because you can't really train a cat. The scene in which we matched expressions was accidental, and with the more sedated cat, but not sedated by us. [laughs] I would just watch him out of the corner of my eye, and when I felt him ready to go I would try to match up with him. As soon as that happened you could hear everyone laughing behind the camera.

*“Inside Llewyn Davis” opens everywhere on December 20th. Featuring Oscar Isaac, Carey Mulligan, John Goodman and Justin Timberlake. Written and Directed by Joel and Ethan Coen. Rated “R”*



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