

Interview: ‘Mud’ Director Jeff Nichols Drives the ‘Midnight Special’

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CHICAGO – Writer/Director Jeff Nichols is a pure American voice, understanding the dreams of the U.S. culture, and how those dreams interact with the morality they create. After breaking out with the films “Take Shelter” and “Mud,” he is back with his latest cinema vision, “Midnight Special.”

“Midnight Special” is a Steven Spieberg-like chase film, as a young boy is kidnapped from a religious cult. As the kidnapping team (Michael Shannon and Joel Egerton) stay on the run, the forces of government and faith clash over the ultimate fate of the boy, whose truth is reveal along the journey.



Director Jeff Nichols (right) Sets the Scene in ‘Midnight Special’

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Jeff Nichols is Southern born – Little Rock, Arkansas – and made his film debut with “Shotgun Stories” in 2007. He writes and directs all of his films, which are highly allegorical, and distinctly American. “Midnight Special” also marks the third film Nichols has done with actor Michael Shannon. His next project is a departure – a historical drama regarding the Supreme Court case which eliminated laws regarding mixed race marriage, entitled “Loving.”

HollywoodChicago.com sat in a roundtable conversation with Jeff Nichols, who spoke about his filmmaker philosophies. Non-HC inquiries are indicated by QUESTION.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your last three films, which include ‘Midnight Special,’ the focus in on a character that by either their decision, or in the case of the current film an otherworldly boy, are made outsiders. What fascinates you about the concept of an outsider, and what element of your personality attracts you to those characters?

Jeff Nichols: This is why Mike Shannon and I get along so well, through the outsider characterization, because I grew up around men like that. They are extraordinarily thoughtful and compassionate, but are unable to openly express themselves. That what makes an outsider, the inability to convey one's self to others, and it pushes a personality to the outer edges.

I haven't made this movie yet, but at some point I want to explore the social cycle of people who can't match up with society, so they become outsiders. But at some point popular culture absorbs them, and they become the same thing they once denied. That happened with punk rock, the motorcycle culture, and the 1960s hippie movement. It would be fascinating to understand that through a film.

QUESTION: The film seems to be a different palette or landscape than your previous films. What precipitated that change in direction?

Nichols: Oddly enough, I feel it's a pretty clear extension of the other films. The departure on this one may be the balance between the genre aspects and the personal aspects. They all have starting points in genre – 'Shotgun Stories' was a revenge drama, 'Take Shelter' was a psychological thriller, 'Mud' was a getaway film and 'Midnight Special' is a sci-fi chase film. How much of the genre do I make, and how much do I dismantle? This one was a calculated effort to have the genre elements more present, but of course explore the personal.

QUESTION: Since you spoke of genre, how do you relate to it?

Nichols: Genre is a great way to invite people into the theater. They come in with these pre-conceived notions and ideas of what they're going to get in that experience. You can use that against the audience in a very valuable way, but mainly it helps you sell movie tickets, so there is some pragmatism to encapsulating a personal film in a genre candy wrapper. Genre also acts as a balancer. If I was just making personal movies they might be too melodramatic, or if it was just genre, it might be hollow. So it's a constant yin-yang of the two things together. I think they help each other.

HollywoodChicago.com: Much of 'Midnight Special' has to do with the people outside of the boy desiring the 'savior' elements of his being. What is your view on the belief in religious deities, and how does that come through, in your opinion, in the film?

Nichols: Am I making a statement about organized religion? Sure. But hopefully the film has a few layers when it talks about belief and faith. As I was writing 'Take Shelter' and 'Mud,' I began to realize in order to create a complete character, you have to build a belief system for them. The belief system of Mud was based on superstition, and it led him in everything he did. So I began to create belief systems for my characters – for example, in the film the parents are just trying to take care of the boy's needs.

HollywoodChicago.com: What about the ranch that is depicted, and how they follow the boy?

The ranch in the film is the most obvious commentary on organized religion. I grew up Methodist, and went to church every week, and have evolved to another place in my life regarding religion for now. I do believe good things can come from it, but the problem is rooted in people building these beliefs, and then thinking they have the answers start to put it on other people.

That's when religion can be negative – it's one thing for you to try and understand your position in the universe, you have to work that out for yourself. Maybe your kids will ask you about it, so you need to have some ready answers. Organically that's how we do it, whether we're in an organized spiritual space or not. The danger is in forcing others to follow your beliefs.



Director Jeff Nichols (left) On the Set of 'Mud'

Photo credit: Roadside Attractions

HollywoodChicago.com: How is this symbolized in the film, for example?

The Bill Camp character has a moral compass. He knows the things he is doing is not right, but he let's that compass be overwhelmed by the belief system of somebody else. That turns out to be evil.

QUESTION: Your filmmaking is praised for both character and storytelling. What is the process of developing your stories, is it through one or the other, or do they both come together organically?

Nichols: I'm not a believer in plot driving a story. Character is the influencer of plot, or should be the influencer. But I think that is why my endings are sometimes tricky for some people, because I don't care about endings. I care about coming to a behavior culmination, and an emotional culmination for a character. The details are irrelevant to me. So that is why some people are put off by my endings, because they're looking for some summation of plot, and that doesn't concern me.

HollywoodChicago.com: You seem fascinated with survival skills in human beings through your films. What survival skills are your favorites in humans, that you observe or possess, that you've seemed to make a theme in your films?

Nichols: I would describe it a bit differently, but maybe this description is part of a survival skill – it's pragmatism. I consider myself a very rational person, in a very irrational business. That's how I approach the story – I simply like to ask what my characters would do with a certain situation. For instance, the 'Amber Alert' in the beginning of the film. I let it evolve organically, and it becomes the bigger story as the chase progresses. The kidnappers get further and further away from this point, and it seems to create a bigger net. That seemed like a pragmatic development.

In 'Take Shelter,' it was the same thing. If I thought the end of the world was coming, what would I do? I'd buy bottled water and canned food and develop a shelter in the back yard. It's built upon the notion of being pragmatic.

QUESTION: With the government intervention in the film, there is sort of a shift from one organized structure – the ranch – to the government intervention in regard to the boy. Were you speaking about the structures that people cling to in society?

Nichols: Again, the characters need belief systems. For the Adam Driver government character, for example, it is about an almost backward spiritualism. He is a guy that believes in numbers and statistics, and it adds up – 2 plus 2 equals 4. He has a desire to experience something else. Maybe he has a hole in his life that math hasn't answered. It's not about God, but how the universe may work in a way we can't wrap our minds around. That's how he's seeing things – he's sharp enough to know his own limitations. I want to hang out with that character.

HollywoodChicago.com: What about the Joel Edgerton character?

Nichols: He is more of an agnostic. I picture him before the events in the film as a state trooper in West Texas. He comes upon a wreck, and there are dead children in car, and he thinks there is no reason for it, no justice in it, it's just the way of the world. His rational mind keeps fighting with the situations he's confronted with – as the boy gets more ill in the film, he sees it for what it is. It happens.

QUESTION: Your films possess a sense of human mystery. Does that mystery drive you in the development of your stories?



Director Jeff Nichols in Chicago

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Nichols: Mystery is part of good storytelling. I don't want these films to be obscure. I want people to watch and enjoy them. I don't want to be a cool, niche-based filmmaker, although that may be what I am. [laughs] In unfolding a story, mystery is one of the fun dynamics. It's about the experience of the story, as soon as a character appears on screen you want to make connections to them. Are they good? Bad? As a storyteller, I can play off that.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your next film – 'Loving' – is a dramatization of a real historical event, the Loving v. Virginia case involving

interracial marriage. What attracted you to the story, and what was the hook that created the sense of drama in the case?

Nichols: It’s very simple, I think it’s the most beautiful love story in American history. There is a simplicity to the story and the people involved that cuts through any political or social agendas. Their position was easy to understand, they wanted to be left alone.

That was beautiful to me, it went beyond the entrenched modes of thought and opinion that people have about interracial marriage. The Lovings debunked that, and I felt that the purity of their relationship pierced the issue without politics. It was two people who loved each other, I think most people can understand that core.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was the urge not to use a version of the song ‘Midnight Special’ difficult as you were putting the film together?

Nichols: [Laughs] Yeah, there were even places where it would fit in the film, it was very tempting.

“Midnight Special” continues its nationwide release in Chicago on April 1st. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Michael Shannon, Joel Edgerton, Kirsten Dunst, Adam Driver and Sam Shepard. Written and directed by Jeff Nichols. Rated “PG-13”



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