

‘Not Fade Away’ is a Slice of Rock ‘n Roll Heaven

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on December 28, 2012 - 9:21am

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – It seems impossible today to get a sense of what it was like around 1964, when rock music changed forever with the “British Invasion” of The Beatles. But writer/director David Chase (“The Sopranos”) brings that distinct energy back with the nostalgic and incendiary “Not Fade Away.”

The second wave of the “invasion,” which included The Rolling Stones, is the inspiration for the 18-year-old boy in New Jersey, whose life is about to change forever because of the sonic blast from overseas. The fab wonder of “Not Fade Away” is that it feels in the moment, so it’s not about the cars, trends or clothing of the era – although that is letter perfect – it is about the music, and the effect the music has on a generation lost in space. It’s time to join the band, and the process of doing that – with all the riffs and sorrows – is achingly portrayed, including the anger of a father who just doesn’t understand. As Chase proved as the creator of “The Sopranos,” it’s not always about what is on the surface.

Douglas Damiano (John Magaro) is a New Jersey boy on the cusp of college in the seminal year of 1963. He lives in working class splendor with this father Pat (James Gandolfini), mother Antoinette (Molly Price) and sister Evelyn (Meg Guzulesscu). He is sitting in a dorm room when the tinny sounds of “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” comes through the radio, and right through his soul. The year includes the breakthrough from his new favorite group, The Rolling Stones, and Douglas is inspired to start a band.



This decision starts a journey that will lead Douglas through four revolutionary years in America's history. He morphs from an awkward teen to a Bob Dylan-esque rock god, and even impresses his high school crush, Grace (Bella Heathcoate). The problem is with his WWII veteran father, who doesn't care about the pursuit of music or what is happening to his son's attitude. As many experienced in that hotbed time, it was a clash of generations that had the potential to destroy relationships.

By filtering the story through the family, David Chase allows for the normal American life to be the contrast to the exciting hope of being a rock star. It was a time when an ordinary working class teen like Douglas could break out in a new thought process, a new education and ride a revolutionary change. The subtle changes in Douglas, through his outer appearance, expression of thought and key relationships, define a bit of what was going on in 1960s America.

The performances are essential, and communicate the clash of the generations succinctly. James Gandolfini (the former Tony Soprano) lends a hand to his old colleague Chase and becomes a boiling pot of anger towards his prodigal son. John Magaro does the heavy lifting of the centerpiece in the film, and morphs into the rocker with a passion and energy that carries the torch for that age group in a peculiar time. One of the best and slyest performances is that of Meg Guzulescu as sister Evelyn, who goes through a transformation herself in the background, evolving from gawky teen to prescient go-go girl. She is also the narrator of the film, which adds a unexpected poignancy to the world split apart.

The soundtrack is a whirlwind of the 1960s music revolution, effectively communicating different parts of the story. As Chase brilliantly used music to punctuate 'The Sopranos,' so does he magnificently allow the radio and album hits to express the winsome and troubling times. The first song that gets Douglas some notice in his peer group is when he covers The Rolling Stones "Time is On My Side," which both directly and ironically points out his circumstance. The tracks are also a tribute to rock n' roll's blues roots, with Bo Diddley and even the master blues man Robert Johnson listed in the credits.



I Read the News Today, Oh Boy: The Patriarch Pat (James Gandolfini) in 'Not Fade Away'
Photo credit: Paramount Vantage

When a filmmaker writes a love letter to his life and times, the passion is evident in every frame. This is David Chase's prose poem to the 1960s, and it is shown without tears and without overtly relying on fashion or sentimentality. It is a reminder of the film version of The Who's rock opera, Quadrophenia. But instead of the Mods versus the Rockers, it's the American male in conflict with World War II morality versus the revolution everywhere. The musicians were leading the way, and Chase wants that front and center.

The crystalizing moment, emblematic of what was to come, happened early in the film. From a static-laden AM radio in a dorm room, the first chords of "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" broke through to the atmosphere. A perplexed and gobsmacked character walks into the room and says dreamily, "What's that?"

"Not Fade Away" continues its limited release in Chicago on December 28th. See local listings for show times and theaters. Featuring John Magaro, James Gandolfini, Molly Price, Brad Garrett, Christopher McDonald and Meg Guzulescu. Written and directed by David Chase. Rated "R"



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Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 24 2024 - 12:29am*):

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