

‘Inside Llewyn Davis’ Resonates Like Long-Lost Folk Masterpiece

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 19, 2013 - 11:18am

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

Films about musicians are remarkably common. Artists from one medium have always loved to put themselves in the well-worn shoes of craftsmen from another. Most of them are stories of an underrated talent rising to the top of his profession, designed for both audience and filmmaker to live vicariously through the protagonist’s success. “Inside Llewyn Davis,” the latest masterpiece from Joel & Ethan Coen, is not one of those stories. Its title character is kind of a jerk, probably not the most talented musician in his circle of friends, and struggles with real-life issues like unplanned pregnancies and just finding a place to sleep as much as he does with his profession. He is also one of the most fascinating film characters in years, the driving force behind a remarkable piece of cinema – a tonal tightrope act by the Coens that is comedy, drama, musical, and something completely new at the same time. It’s a must-see in every way.

Approach “Inside Llewyn Davis” like a long-lost folk recording from the early ‘60s brought to life. The narrative features many songs played in their entirety with the connective narrative in between almost serving as the liner notes for the music. Loosely based on a pre-Dylan Village staple named Dave Van Ronk, Llewyn Davis (Oscar Isaac) is the kind of guy who often says more through his music than he does through dialogue. The film opens with him singing “*Hang me, oh hang me, I’ll be dead and gone. Hang me, oh hang me, I’ll be dead and gone. Wouldn’t mind the hanging but the laying in the grave so long, poor boy, been all around this world.*” Davis is a world-weary traveler. He has bounced from couch to couch, session to session, gig to gig, and reached something of a breaking point. He’s ready to be hanged.



Inside Llewyn Davis
Photo credit: CBS Films

Sticking with the theme of “Inside Llewyn Davis” being like a folk album translated into cinematic form, the Coens’ script is their most episodic to date. There’s only brief pushes of narrative to get us through these few days with Llewyn. He mistakenly allows a cat to escape from the home of his latest benefactors and is forced to carry him around before he can be returned. He tries to crash in the apartment of Jim (Justin Timberlake) and Jean (Carey Mulligan), only to discover that the latter is pregnant and the baby might be Llewyn’s. He does a recording session for a hilariously catchy bit of pop fluff called “Please Mr. Kennedy” (with Timberlake and Adam Driver). And he car pools to Chicago with a drug-addicted jazz musician (John Goodman) and a James Dean wannabe (Garrett Hedlund), where he performs for a musical power broker (F. Murray Abraham).

How are all these plot threads connected? How does Goodman’s ornery passenger relate to Mulligan’s insult-spewing singer? They don’t directly in the same way that two songs on Bob Dylan’s “Highway 61 Revisited” don’t have to connect with a straight line. But they are of the same tonal fabric. As Davis bounces from apartment to studio to car to club, the Coens pull off a cinematic feat in the way they take relatively disparate plot threads and elements and make them feel of a cohesive whole.

My appreciation of “Inside Llewyn Davis” as a tonal experience should not be meant to imply there’s nothing going on narratively or thematically. From beat to beat, “Llewyn” is engaging in the action of the moment as much as it is as an overall piece. I loved Llewyn’s road trip, his scenes with Mulligan, a breakdown at a dinner where he feels his art is being questioned, every single musical number, and more. And one of the scenes of the year for me has to be when Llewyn plays one of the most important performances of his life for that producer. Without spoiling anything, why Llewyn picks that particular song in that moment says something more truthful about how artists hold on to their integrity and use song as expression than anything I can remember in film history.



Inside Llewyn Davis

Photo credit: CBS Films

Every element of “Llewyn Davis” connects from Bruno Delbonnel’s wonderfully nostalgic cinematography, filming the action almost lit like a memory instead of reality, to every single supporting performance. Special notice must be given to Mr. Isaac, who breaks through after great supporting turns in films like “Drive” to prove that he can absolutely carry a major film. Llewyn Davis is NOT an easy character. He’s not particularly likable, but Davis keeps us engaged with him that we always want to see what he does next without desperately begging us to root for him as other actors would have done with the part.

“Inside Llewyn Davis” doesn’t feel like it’s trying to make a major statement about art, integrity, or a lost era, and yet it will do exactly that for some people. It contains a narrative structure that is, again, similar to an album, ending where it begins and encouraging the listener to simply hit play and start over. Film lovers will be doing just that for decades to come.

“Inside Llewyn Davis” stars Oscar Isaac, Carey Mulligan, Justin Timberlake, Adam Driver, John Goodman, Garrett Hedlund, and F. Murray Abraham. It was written and directed by Joel & Ethan Coen. It is now playing in some markets and opens in Chicago tomorrow, December 20, 2013. It is rated R.

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