

## SING STREET - John Carney



### «Sing Street» And The Wonderful Happy-Sad Feeling Of Coming Of Age

«Sing Street» is a charming ode to first loves and '80s music.

When I arrived in Park City, Utah last Thursday for the Sundance Film Festival, I did so with all of the wide-eyed enthusiasm of a first-timer. As a fan of quirky dramedies and indie soundtracks, I was told Sundance would be my kind of ~scene~ -- a place where little films with big hearts make you feel happy-sad. You know, just like that feeling you get when you listen to Robert Smith sing about being alone above a raging sea on «Just Like Heaven.»

I thought I had found that feeling in Sundance films like «Other People» and «Hunter For The Wilderpeople» -- films that mix humor and pathos almost at a breakneck pace -- and then I saw «Sing Street,» a film so charming that it made me feel weightless. When I left the Eccles Theater, I had butterflies in my stomach. And with that, I knew I had fallen in love, slowly and then all at once. Simply put, this is a movie that will make you feel alive.

To be fair, «Sing Street» combines my love of coming-of-age movies with my complete adoration of '80s music, so to say this film was made for me would be quite the understatement. Over the past decade, writer-director John Carney («Once,» «Begin Again») has carved out his own unique genre of film: happy-sad musical romance. No one understands the narrative process of songwriting, and falling in love, quite like Carney.

Unlike his previous films, however, «Sing Street» is a hopeful, nostalgic romance set in Dublin in 1985. The film follows 15-year-old Connor's (newcomer Ferdia Walsh-Peelo) ambitious venture to pull together a ragtag band to try and impress a girl. After all, most musicians get their starts writing lovelorn songs to classmates they fancy. But «Sing Street» cuts deeper than teenage romance.

Culturally and economically, times were tempestuous in Ireland during the '80s. There was the overwhelming sense that in order to make something of your life you had to get the hell out of Dodge. So, young people flocked to London to find themselves. They looked to London and America as places of cultural substance. When Connor first meets 16-year-old Raphina on a stoop outside of his rough-and-tough new school, she's destined for bigger and better things as a model in London, or so she says. (Her mid-'80s MTV aesthetic is also on point.)

He falls in love with her beauty and bullet-proof confidence almost instantly. «We need to form a band,» he tells a newfound school friend, who quickly assumes the role of band manager and introduces Connor to Eamon (Mark McKenna), a rabbit-obsessed teen who's proficient at playing several instruments and has all the equipment because his alcoholic father is in a cover band.

Connor and Eamon are the film's Lennon and McCartney. Throughout the film, we see their development both as friends and songwriters. Connor writes the lyrics; Eamon builds the music. From there, they recruit other members of the band, which they call Sing Street, a play on their Catholic school, Synge Street School. Their first song, inspired by Raphina and influenced by the music of Duran Duran, is called «The Riddle of the Model.» It's not a great song by any means (nor should it be) but it's catchy. It also gets approval from Raphina, who agrees to star in the band's music video.

The evolution of the music in «Sing Street» is one of the best elements of this delightful film. Connor's older brother Brendan (Jack Reynor) becomes his musical guru of sorts, lending him records and giving him tips on how to impress Raphina. As Connor learns more about Duran Duran, The Cure, ABC and other bands from Brendan, he shifts his musical styles and looks. For example, when Connor discovers the happy-sad music of The Cure, he comes to school the next morning in eyeshadow and eyeliner. It's a wonderful ode to '80s music and style. And whenever anyone asks him what kind of music he plays, he says he's a futurist -- always looking forward, not back.

It's impossible to resist clapping along with the band's stellar single «Drive It Like You Stole It,» and it's even harder not to grin like an idiot watching the stellar music video fever dream that accompanies it in the film. It's the closest Carney has ever come to a choreographed musical number, and it's positively brilliant.

As Connor's music progresses, so does his relationship with Raphina. It would be easy to write off Raphina as a manic pixie dream girl. After all, she is the catalyst for Connor's personal progression. But Raphina's character arc is one of the more compelling in the film, as Carney pulls back the layers and exposes her vulnerability. We learn about her abusive father and manic-depressive mother who's in and out of hospital. Her relationship with Connor ultimately brings out her innocence.

That innocence is the driving force of «Sing Street» -- that adventurous feeling that you could do anything or be anyone, even a rock star, if you just follow your heart. In a bittersweet scene, Brendan tells Connor that he regrets never took the same risks to chase his own dreams when he was younger. It might be too late for Brendan, but he's going to make damn sure it's not too late for Connor.

So, yes. «Sing Street» is simple, happy-sad love story. One between a boy and a girl, a boy and his brother and most importantly, a boy and music.

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