

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
May 2016

Sing Street (dir. John Carney, 2016)

On Camera

Cosmo Ferdia Walsh-Peelo: His first movie; a performing musician since age 12
Raphina Lucy Boynton: *Miss Potter* (06); BBC's *Sense and Sensibility* (08)
Brendan, brother Jack Reynor: *What Richard Did* (12), *Glassland* (15), with Toni Collette
Band members First movie for pretty much all of them; no other projects currently lined up
Mother Maria Doyle Kennedy: *The Commitments* (91), TV's *Orphan Black* (13-16)
Father Aiden Gillen: *Some Mother's Son* (96), with Helen Mirren; *The Wire* (04-08)
Schoolmaster Don Wycherly: *Veronica Guerin* (03), with Cate Blanchett; lots of Irish TV

Off Camera

Director-Writer John Carney: Oscar winner *Once* (06; 07 in US); *Begin Again* (13; 14 in US)
Cinematography Yaron Orbach: *Begin Again*; *Please Give* (10); *Orange Is the New Black* (14-15)
Film Editing Andrew Marcus: moved from Merchant Ivory to song-and-dance movies
Art Direction Alan McDonald: *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (11), *Philomena* (13)

Earlier films by John Carney:

November Afternoon (1996) – Small Irish drama about two couples and buried family secrets

Park (1999) – Mystery drama about a woman's date to meet a good friend who never shows up

On the Edge (2001) – Comedy about patients on a suicide ward (!); starring Cillian Murphy

Once (2006) – Carney's breakthrough; Oscar for Best Original Song; later a Broadway musical; story of an Irish street musician (Glen Hansard) and a young Czech immigrant in Dublin (Markéta Irglová) who also plays music; they record an album together... but will that be all?

Zonad (2009) – Comedy about a family's unexpected guest, who pretends to be a superhero

*The Rafter*s (2012) – Two backpackers on the wind-swept Aran Islands are rivals for a woman

Begin Again (2013) – Originally titled *Can a Song Save Your Life?*, a drama about a washed-up rock producer (Mark Ruffalo) who recovers his inspiration by crossing paths with a lonely singer-songwriter (Keira Knightley) who's been overshadowed by her famous boyfriend

Russ and Roger Go Beyond (in development) – Planned as a fact-based comedy-drama about drive-in director Russ Meyer and young screenwriter Roger Ebert, who came together to make the sleaze-cinema classic *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970)

Some trivia about *Sing Street*

Carney has described *Sing Street* as a homecoming and a battery-charging project to rediscover his love of cinema after the stresses of bigger stars and bigger budgets on *Begin Again*.

The dedication that appears on screen after the final shot is “To Brothers Everywhere,” and indeed Carney, a youngest child, considers *Sing Street* an homage to his older brother. Still, he told a UK website that the initial inspiration was about the boys writing music together.

The movie’s trailer, featuring a-Ha, The Cure, and other 80s pop bands featured in the movie (yes, even Phil Collins) largely concealed that the film had an original song score of its own, and implied that it was something closer to a jukebox musical of actual, era-specific hits.

The father and uncles of Ferdia Walsh-Peelo, who plays Cosmo, attended the real Synge Street Christian Brothers School, which also allowed Carney and his collaborators to film on the actual grounds. If you stayed through the credits, you might have seen some language added to the very end that explains that Synge Street was a very different place with different values at the time *Sing Street* takes place, and that the school is currently well-known for its diverse and multicultural students, its progressive ethos, and its students’ academic excellence.

A few details in the movie help establish 1985 as the year it takes place, though *Sing Street* occasionally fudges that chronology. For example, the Duran Duran video for “Rio” that excited Cosmo, Brendan, and their mother on *Top of the Pops* was three years old by the time this story unfolds. At least one song at the Synge Street dance is from 1987.

Speaking of Duran Duran, you’ll notice how Brendan insists on the skill and sexiness of that band’s bassist, John Taylor. Carney was the bassist in a rock band before taking up cinema.

In an earlier draft of the script, Barry (the bully) was repressing gay feelings and being punished at home for telltale signs of not being “manly” enough. Cosmo eventually figured out what Barry was hiding and convinced him to accept himself and stop the cycle of violence. Carney eventually cut these scenes but still thinks of this as the backstory of the Barry we know.

Adam Levine of Maroon 5 and *The Voice*, who played a key onscreen role in *Begin Again*, also helped co-write the song (“Go Now”) that plays over the final boat trip. He also sings the song, in a different register than we usually hear his voice. Levine, *Once* star Glen Hansard, and John Carney himself all play some of the instruments we hear in the movie’s score.

At one point, U2 were going to work more directly with Carney on the songs and even the story for the film. Their schedules prohibited a full collaboration, but their advice about story, music, and starting out in Ireland in the 1980s still influenced *Sing Street*. (c/o The Verge)

In another interview, Carney discussed how even a small movie like this takes years and years to develop, during which time the idea and the script and the overall vision change constantly—that there is really no such thing as just “bringing your idea directly to the screen.” Having gone through that collaborative, transformative process so many times, it was important to him that Cosmo, his band, and their sound constantly change as they keep collaborating.

Broad questions about *Sing Street*

Truth and Artifice: Do you think that, in *Sing Street*, Cosmo finally discovers who he “really” is, through his music and his relationships? Does Raphina go on that type of journey? Or do they both keep reinventing themselves, separately and together, in a way the film endorses? There’s a way of reading the film as a process of discovery by the two leads, and another that might see them as connecting with each other precisely because each is attracted to the way the other is “performing” as himself or herself. What do you think? Is it a little of both?

Originality: Brendan insists that *Sing Street* must not let itself turn into a covers band, and indeed, from that point forward, the young boys only play songs they compose themselves. How would the movie have been different if they performed renditions of famous songs, or a combination of new material and familiar favorites? Would you have preferred that? In repeating some themes from his previous work fairly closely, including the use of music as an expressive outlet and emotional connector, is Carney “covering” himself to an extent?

Politics: Have you ever seen a movie set in Ireland in the mid-1980s that made so little reference to political turmoil or public violence? Indeed, London mostly serves as a fantasy-space where dreams are made, or at least a place for thwarted small-town Irish kids to escape to, rather than the capital of an enemy empire. What do you make of this choice in *Sing Street*?

Reconciliation: Cosmo learns to make art about some of his negative experiences (especially the song “Brown Shoes”), but in a way this is an alternative strategy to *changing* those experiences. In other words, he seems to accept that he cannot change the power hierarchy at school, or force his parents to stay together, but at least he can express his feelings about these things. Then again, his success in recruiting Barry as a “roadie” for the band implies that you can sometimes fix a negative situation. What did you think *Sing Street* finally espoused: trying to change your life, or learning to work comfortably within its parameters?

Happy-Sad: It’s hard not to feel that *Sing Street* is talking about itself when Raphina tells Cosmo that his problem is that he hasn’t learned how to feel happy in and despite his sadness—a piece of wisdom that his older brother Brendan also endorses. Did you find the movie spirit lifting? Did you find it mostly sad? Was it a combination for you? Your response might have a lot to do with your reading of the film’s ending, which ...

The Ending: Carney has intimated in interviews that he never intended the finale to be entirely literal: that Cosmo and Raphina do indeed set off for London in the boat, but that aspects of what we observe in those final minutes should feel more like a fairy tale than a pure reality. Was that how you responded? What details might align with Carney’s take on his own ending? By contrast, what aspects might have cued you to “buy into” what you saw? There is a related question of tone: did you find the ending happy, sad, or something in between?

Associations: What movies did *Sing Street* recall for you? Carney has named the cult comedy *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004) as another youth movie that feels “made by” its own characters. I thought of the UK teen romance *Beautiful Thing* (1996), working-class comedies like *The Full Monty* (1997), the music film *Almost Famous* (2000), and the recent *Pride* (2014).

Excerpt from “*Sing Street Gets It*” by Teo Bugbee, April 15, 2016
<http://www.mtv.com/news/2868330/sing-street-gets-it/>

Carney’s new movie, *Sing Street*, is both glossier than *Once* and more familiar than *Begin Again*, but the slick production doesn’t diminish Carney’s powers of observation, either musically or emotionally. Carney transports us back into the Dublin of the 1980s, where we follow Cosmo (whose given name is Conor), a high school student who falls in love with a cooler, older girl, Raphina, after his parents’ financial troubles push him into a new school. She wants to be a model, so he decides to make a band so he can recruit her help making music videos.

If the first two films in Carney’s unofficial musician cycle took you into the creative process of established musicians, *Sing Street* opens up new possibilities for Carney by centering around an artist as he learns to become an artist.

Carney’s movies have always been characterized by an involving tenderness, which as it turns out is an especially moving attitude for an adult to take toward the ambitions of kids. Listening to a pair of 15-year-old boys talk over their simple pop lyrics, like “she’s got dangerous eyes,” without their thoughts and discoveries being either lionized or dismissed feels uncomfortable and new, but the boys remain unaware that what they’re saying could be embarrassing. I like that when we go inside Cosmo’s head, his image of the perfect video isn’t nearly as cool or as interesting as the half-successes he’s actually been able to shoot. Carney notes all of Cosmo’s fumbling, all of the band’s dropped cymbals and blatant imitations of adult bands, but there’s no judgment attached to their inadequacies. Carney’s camera floats over the boys with the delicacy of a parent filming their child learning to walk. It’s not that you want the newborns to stumble around forever, but the transience of this period of vulnerability makes it almost painful to watch — celebration and mourning occur in the same moment.

Watching movies made by men about men as a woman can sometimes be an exercise in impotent frustration, and most of the rest of the time gender seems irrelevant or at least inoffensive. But every now and then, a film by and about men speaks to the experience of living as a woman, and Carney’s interest in portraying the honest experience of artists winds up having the maybe accidental effect of being just as honest about gender.

Sing Street documents not just Cosmo’s first stumbles in music, but his first romance, too, and rather than treating music and love as two discrete worlds, Cosmo is a character who experiences both at once and in relation to each other. Just as he’s being taught how to be lead a band, he’s also being taught how to lead in a relationship, and from the start, his embarrassments and his successes in one arena are the same as his embarrassments and his successes in the other.

Cosmo begins *Sing Street* shy and unassuming, the permanently red cheeks of actor Ferdia Walsh-Peelo making for the perfect picture of cherubic inexperience, but as the film develops he starts to show flashes of confidence. He’s prodded by his brother to take risks, prodded by Raphina to act without deference, prodded by the boys at school to stand tall, until those flashes of confidence become sustained periods of it. There comes a point in the movie when Raphina calls him a schoolboy and he walks away — it’s not clear when the change happened, but it is clear that she’s misidentified him. If Cosmo starts the movie as a schoolboy, by the time it’s over

he's well on his way to being something else. He's still not a man, exactly, but he's become kind of a Byronic hero. He's comfortable in his authority to brood.

Regardless of gender, the feeling of falling in love is the same. It's only once you start to enter the codes of how we're taught to behave that the experiences of men and women become different, and the dissonance between watching Cosmo experience relatable emotions while being socialized completely differently about how to respond to those emotions was overwhelming in a way that I didn't anticipate. Would a girl be allowed to fail as much as Cosmo did? Would a girl's community encourage her spectacular self-image the way Cosmo's did? Of course, the rules for behavior become more lenient as we grow into adults, but *Sing Street* wants to explore how musicians get their start, which necessarily means diving into the more rigid world of adolescence.

I liked that Cosmo was taunted at school with gay accusations, and I liked that *Sing Street* understands those taunts as an attempt to hold on to control and power. I liked that Raphina is a character who keeps high standards for herself, because that's what you have to do if you have limited options and you want to escape from your hometown. I liked that in every one of the mothers we see, there's a hint that she was once a Raphina. I liked that the story acknowledged that Cosmo's innocence was the result of his brother's effort to keep him innocent. Cosmo doesn't exist in this movie as an exception — instead, he is the product of his environment, his exceptionalism of a recognized sort. He's the one the community has chosen to defy the rules of the community.

In Hollywood, there has been a lot of talk over the last few years about why there aren't more female filmmakers, why there aren't more female writers. Fortunately, there are more women making bands and more women writing books, but even then, the numbers of boys who feel comfortable putting their feelings and their experiences out into the world outnumbers girls by a wide margin. In trying to address these problems, people usually talk about financial incentives and hiring practices, but that's only addressing the inequality that arises once you get a woman through the door. The problem of gender inequality in the arts becomes a lot trickier to solve if you consider the possibility that the role we play in our communities is just as much a deterrent to making art as money is.

What are the effects of teaching boys but not girls to be the active partner in a relationship? Is there space in our culture for girls to picture themselves as a romantic hero? How can you make art if you're the only one who can picture yourself at the center of your vision? Will your art be limited if your access to role models is limited too?

Sing Street asks every one of those questions on its way to finding a happy ending for Cosmo, and it doesn't try to lie about the answers. It takes a village to raise a child. But it takes the cumulative effect of every village that has ever existed to raise an artist.