

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Coen Bros' Comedy of Resilience: T Bone Burnett & Oscar Isaac Take Us 'Inside Llewyn Davis'

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, December 4th, 2013

Inspired by “The Mayor of MacDougal Street” Dave Van Ronk’s memoir, “Inside Llewyn Davis” chronicles a week in the life of a struggling folk musician as interpreted by Joel and Ethan Coen. The action takes place primarily in Greenwich Village of the early 1960’s, just prior to the arrival on the scene of Bob Dylan, the “Great Folk Revival,” and the singer-songwriter movement that Dylan fomented. “Real songs, made up people,” was the pitch the Coen Brothers used to hook music producer T Bone Burnett for their fourth feature film collaboration.

Burnett became determined to diversify when the Beatles released their music on CD. After watching “Raising Arizona” in 1987, he was prompted to cold-call the dynamic duo of film, but it would not be until 1997 that they would collaborate in a filmmaking venture. In 2002, the legendary soundtrack of “O Brother, Where Art Thou” won the Grammy award for Album of the Year. It has since sold 7.8 million copies and netted a cool \$5 million. With “Inside Llewyn Davis,” Burnett and the Coen Brothers continue push the boundaries of the film-musical form they innovated, wherein story is a vehicle for evocative music and nuanced character study. Songs are ingeniously captured in live performances that are allowed to play out in their entirety, to take center stage in the narrative.

The challenge in casting was to locate an actor with the musical chops to pull it off. The search landed solidly with Oscar Isaac. Not only is Isaac an accomplished and pedigreed actor (a graduate of the Julliard school whose acting credits include “The Bourne Legacy,” “W.E.,” and “Robin Hood”), Isaac had played lead guitar in the ska-punk band he founded once upon a time, “The Blinking Underdogs.” The all-star cast of “Inside Llewyn Davis” includes sparkling cameos from Justin Timberlake, Carey Mulligan, John Goodman, Garrett Hedlund, Adam Driver, and F. Murray Abramson.

“Inside Llewyn Davis” won the Grand Jury Award at the Cannes Film Festival last year and just won the Gotham Award for Best Film this past week. I had an opportunity to speak with T Bone Burnett and Oscar Isaac at the Ritz-Carlton San Francisco Hotel in a roundtable discussion of Dylan, digital sound, and the Coen Brothers’ comedy of resilience.



John Goodman in Joel and Ethan Coen’s “Inside Llewyn Davis.” Photo: Alison Rosa ©2012 Long Strange Trip LLC.

T Bone, when you cold-called the Coen Brothers back in 1987, you sensed that you were “anarchically disciplined, kindred sprits.” What motivated you to place that call?

T Bone Burnett: I became a fan of the Coen Brothers after their first movie, [“Blood Simple”], because it just had so much of my home about it. It was in Texas, and I knew people who had

worked on it. Also, there was a style of story-telling that I thought was really great. Then “Raising Arizona” came out with this insane soundtrack — that crazy Pete Seeger “Ode de Joy” on a banjo. It was just him yodeling, and it was totally mad! Every joke in it, landed for me.

One of the things about the Coen Brothers — there is history in every shot. The shots are drawn up in the morning. They will give the actors sides that have the lines below a drawing from the storyboards, with the camera angle. The Coen Brothers have it all cut in their head before they shoot it. This is one of the reasons why they have control. Because economy is the essence of art. I was looking at all the detail in “Raising Arizona.” I thought, we must have seen all the same films growing up?! Because it was just speaking to me. It got to that point where John Goodman and his cohort come up out of the ground and go into the service station to comb their hair, and there is graffiti written in spray paint on the back of the bathroom door: “OPE POE” And I thought, this is how detailed they are, they would take a quote from Dr. Strangelove, (“Purity of essence, and peace on earth.”) and spray paint it backwards on the door of a bathroom! Everything in the frame has tremendous meaning. I had never seen anybody make films with this kind of detail.

Which is what this film, “Inside Llewyn Davis” is all about. The Coen Brothers wanted to make a film about a musician, with as much detail as they could get. They wanted to film him absolutely live, this close, singing and performing live. It’s easy in this day and age with everything we have to create a virtual performance later. You can holographically sample somebody, and completely manipulate them to say and sound like anything you want. But a virtual rendition of a performance captures so little of the detail of the performance. To actually get some really high-quality recording equipment right on a real performance, gives you all the detail and all the depth that you lose in the virtual world.

So they wanted to do the hardest thing you could do. Which if another filmmaker came to me and said, “We want to make a film about a musician, and we want to record it all live, a three-minute song. And we want to do it without a click track, documentary style.” I would have said, “I have to advise you against it!” “You will never find the person who can do it. Because that’s difficult even for Elvis Presley!” To sit there for three minutes and capture you completely, by himself with a guitar — it’s difficult for anyone. So they wanted either a musician (who had never acted), or an actor (who was not a musician) to do that five or six times. Two demanding things: an actor in every frame of the movie and a musician, who when he goes for his big audition in Chicago, the song he choses to play is a song about a cesarean section?! So he’s not a guy who is going out of his way to be ultra-show-biz.

T Bone, you were on the Rolling Thunder Review tour (1975-1976) with a lot of those musicians. How does Llewyn track with the real personalities – Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, Roger McGuinn?

T Bone: I have to say, every artist would track with Llewyn Davis. Bob Dylan was sleeping on coaches. Bob Dylan was sleeping on Dave Van Ronk’s couch, for real. Every one of us goes through that cycle. Look, I’ve been in Hollywood for forty-some years now. I’ve seen people be happening/over, happening/over, happening/over. You know, you just cycle through these things. So, I think that every artist relates to that.

“Inside Llewyn Davis” pays a tribute to the Village scene of the late 1950’s, early 1960’s. There is a line in the film: “You’re in Greenwich Village now, where people come to get away from America.”

T Bone: In Washington Square Park at that time, there were these different camps of musicians playing in the park. All the competition was within the park. It wasn’t for trends on twitter, it was for square feet in a little grassy area in downtown. In the country, right? Because back then, the Village was the country. Nobody was thinking about being famous. They were just thinking about

what was good, and what was authentic.

When Dylan came along, there was all this extraordinary music everywhere and infighting. It was like Fast Eddie came to town and just ran the table. Dylan said, “Well, I’ll have some of that, and that.” He had no compunction. He was doing the right thing. Those people were looking backward and preserving, and they were doing the right thing too. Dylan was going backward and forward at the same time. He was preserving all of that and then reinventing it for us now. We are still living in Bob Dylan’s reinvention of it all.

Now, there is a whole extraordinary group of 21st Century musicians who are so much better than we were. These kids are mind-blowing. Chris Thile is like the Louis Armstrong of this age, without a doubt – that’s not hyperbole. (I’m so old now, and I’ve seen so much stuff, I just try to say what I think!)

Back then, that was a time when they were just trying to be good. It’s a beautiful thing. All the great things happen in small communities that aren’t thinking in grand thoughts. They’re thinking about taking care of the thing that is right under their noses. I would say, Llewyn wasn’t a guy who was thinking about making it in that way. He’s just a guy who’s thinkin’ about what’s good music and what’s not — according to him. It’s about taste — that’s always what it is.

Maybe David Blue thought he would make it. Phil Ochs maybe thought he would make it, right? Because he put on the gold lamé suit, which was mocking making it. Ochs was doing some kind of “I’m the folk Elvis” [act]. It was ironic, and it was meant as a joke, but I don’t think it landed exactly the way he wanted it to. I have a lot of admiration for Phil Ochs and for all those guys, man.

You have credited Danny Elfman for teaching you how to score a film. How have the precepts that he taught you come into play in producing the music on “Inside Llewyn Davis”?

T Bone: This is what Danny taught me: anybody can put a piece of music with some footage and have them connect in some way. There is some touch involved in that, and that’s important. There’s taste involved in that, but that’s not what makes a score. A score is telling a story. It is telling the same story [as the film], but in a different language. The score has to tell the same story from beginning to end. There has to be one arc. To drop in a piece of music here and a piece of music there, if they are not part of this over-arching arc, they are just events.

With the Coens, what we’ve always done is to record everything in advance. Then I string it together. These were not pieces we created after the fact. They were created beforehand, and they are part of the fabric of the film. If you listen to “O Brother, Where Art Thou?,” that’s almost straight down the movie. This one too, the music on the soundtrack is almost placed just like in the movie. So to me, a great soundtrack plays like the movie and tells the same story as the movie.

Do you have any favorite film soundtracks?

T Bone: I like “My Fair Lady.” I’m serious. Even though I thought that “Dr. Strangelove” was a much more adventurous, subversive film that year, and should have won the Academy Award. (I’m talking like a real Hollywood insider!) I love that musical. That song, “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Your Face” – I can barely make it through that song, it’s so beautiful. And “On the Street Where You Live” – it’s just one killer great song, literate song-writing, beautiful melody after another. So, “My Fair Lady” beat “Dr. Strangelove,” which was probably one of the most important movies ever.



Oscar Isaac, Justin Timberlake and Carey Mulligan in Joel and Ethan Coen’s “Inside Llewyn Davis.” Photo: Alison Rosa ©2012 Long Strange Trip LLC.

How did your collaboration with Marcus Mumford on this film project come about?

T Bone: Marcus called up a couple of days after Carey Mulligan had been cast. “Carey is doing

this Llewyn Davis movie. Do you need anybody to make tea or anything?,” he asked. “As a matter of fact,” I said, “There’s this character, Mike Timlin, that I might need you to play.” Marcus and I had talked about movies before, and then I realized, this is just perfect. “If you learn what you want to learn, you’ll know how to make a movie after you do this. So come on in. Produce it with us!,” I suggested. So he did.

Here is the way the Coen’s work generally, everybody puts everything on the table. And then it becomes ours. Because the Coen Brothers are so good, and because you know it’s going to be around in a hundred years or a hundred-thousand years, everybody puts everything on the table. It’s not “mine” or “yours.” For instance, in the studio, we don’t put down “somebody’s guitar part,” we just put down “acoustic guitar.” I don’t like people to say, “Hey would you turn up my guitar part.” People say, “Turn down the acoustic guitar.” I don’t want the people feeling possessive over any part of it because things shift, and it just has to be whatever the best answer is. That’s the beautiful thing about the Coen Brothers, you never feel like they’re some kind of controlling presence. They always come in as the most certain participants. They have a certainty that means you don’t have to worry.

Marcus came in just like that, as one of the boys and he put everything he had on the table with absolute generosity. He’s an extraordinary talent. He’s deep. He’s got a soul. He’s got a beautiful tone. He writes, and he thinks about things. Marcus is going to be around for a long time. Marcus was there the whole time. So was Justin Timberlake, by the way — there full board, the whole time – writing, singing, playing. The Punch Brothers were doing [this bit], and then Marcus and Justin jumped in and sang bass. Nobody jumped in where he wasn’t wanted, but people were contributing, as generously as they could.



Oscar Isaac in Joel and Ethan Coen’s “Inside Llewyn Davis.” Photo: Alison Rosa ©2012 Long Strange Trip LLC.

Oscar, how did you prepare to play this character?

Oscar Isaac: I clung on to Dave Van Ronk’s musical repertoire, for sure. I listened to everything that he recorded. There’s a DVD where he teaches you how to play some of his songs. I tried to rewire my brain to play in that style.

The Coen Brothers’ movies are known for their unique sensibility. Oscar, how did you approach entering into that world?

Oscar: I’m a huge fan of the Coen Brother movies. I went back and I watched all their movies again, just to get back into the tone. One of the lines that stuck out really strongly in relief was when John Turturro in “Barton Fink” says [impersonating Turturro], “I want to make theatre about the common man.” Suddenly it dawned on me: that’s the Coen Brothers’ thesis! They stated it right there. That’s what the Coen Brothers have always done ever since. I just clung to that idea. Then I wondered, why is watching someone struggle to survive funny? Is it because I’m sadistic? Is it a relief, that it is not me? What is that comedy of resilience? I thought a lot about that ... And that brought me to Buster Keaton, actually. Keaton suddenly became a source of inspiration. Here’s a guy — all sorts of horrible shit is constantly happening to him. He’s near death at every moment, and yet he has this melancholic impact in his face. Whether he is in love or whether a house is falling on him, somehow we root for him. There is just a suggestion of a very rich inner life. We are just seeing someone seeing. Keaton is not telling you how to feel about what he is doing. He’s just surviving and taking it all in. Llewyn is constantly being overwhelmed. It was all about just experiencing what was happening, especially because the cameras were so close. Llewyn is a guy who is isolated. He doesn’t try to ingratiate himself or use charm with people. It’s not coming from a place of cool, it’s coming from a place of actual longing. So there is that contradiction.

This film is about the condition of being an artist. Could you identify with Llewyn as an artist struggling to make it? An artist with his own convictions, who sometimes because of those convictions, creates his own obstacles?, either of you.

T Bone: Definitely, for my part, yes. I did it strongly for twenty-five years at least. In that time, I probably passed through this arc two or three times. And I'm still doing it in other ways. I still have convictions, and there are lines that one can't cross. Have you ever seen "The Horse's Mouth" (1958) with Alec Guinness? It's a good movie about artists. I recommend it.

We value artists. The artists are the ones who go out into the dark. Society is like a campfire that people gather round for warmth and safety because at night there are sounds out in the forest, and the artists are the ones who go, "Well, I'm going to go find out what that sound is." We value the artists because they're the ones that go there.

Oscar: There is something that is both completely self-involved and sacrificial about being an artist. There's that constant third eye, that detached eye, that watches. I feel guilty about that sometimes. For example, when you are having an argument or some sort of really emotional moment, and there's that little [voice inside] that's saying, "Ooo, yeah, I'll use that later." You're kind-of a scavenger of your life. You're not just existing. You are also reporting that darkness.

T Bone, you have commented that "digital sound has dehumanized us." How so?

T Bone: I talk about the shortcomings of digital technology in relation to the quality of sound. They say I'm a luddite, and yet I'm working in 5G and I'm working in telepresence and holograms. I'm way beyond. I'm called a luddite by people who are defending an outmoded 20th Century technology, which is the worldwide web, as we have it now.

Honestly, I'm not anti-technology; I'm only anti-bad-technology. I'm anti-Fukushima, for instance, which was bad technology. There is a good reason to not accept technology as "a good thing" as some over-arching concept, like God. Steve Jobs said, "Technology changes nothing" — that's what the avatar said, so we can't forget that, right?!

I don't want to go backward. I want to go forward to something better than we have now. MP3 was never designed as an audio standard. It is a relic from the age of the dial-up mode. The MP3 is compressed audio from a time when there wasn't enough bandwidth to get things through. The fact that the record companies adopted it as an audio standard and tried to sell it, just shows how misguided they were — because it was an obvious free medium!

Any of you is welcome to come to my studio, literally, and I'll A/B you tape, against vinyl, against CD, against 24/96 DVD, against MP3. We can listen to it, and we could agree immediately on an acceptable audio standard. But we're not being given any choices [as consumers]. You see, we're being given the choice of vinyl (which is not green, not portable, not easier to miniaturize), or MP3, or some other vague thing like CD (that is completely outmoded and was horrible in the first place!). What I am looking for and what we're working on is greener, more flexible, more durable, more portable analogue media. Thirty years ago when we began developing digital technology, we stopped developing analogue technology for sound. We need to bring analogue technology up to date, to a place that will far surpass either [the digital or analogue technology we experience today].

I question whether we need one device that will do everything? It's nice to have one device that will do everything o.k. — but I think it is also good to have designated computers for certain things. In our shop, we don't try to have a computer do everything because it gets confused. We have a lot of computers to do specific things. In the world of music, the world of sound — audio as one of the five senses is important enough to address at the highest possible quality level. That's all I'm talking about really.

So far, after fifty years of A/B-ing sound, *nothing* has surpassed audio tape. Although I think, in the world of carbon fiber, we're going to find something we can miniaturize, that is more portable,

that will surpass anything that is available now. I think there will be a new storage medium that will allow you to print 3D in your homes and will give you the most beautiful fidelity.

I just went down to Best Buy and bought a really nice stereo. I set it up in my living room, and I put on Frank Sinatra's record "In the Wee Small Hours of the Mourning." I turned it up and the whole house filled with music in the most profound way.

I use the iTunes all the time. You turn it on, and this thing happens — this facsimile of music takes place. It's the difference between seeing a film in 35 mm or a film on your iPhone.

We have to take music seriously. I take artists seriously, and I take music seriously.

"Inside Llewyn Davis" opens in select cities (New York & Los Angeles) on December 6; in additional cities (San Francisco) on December 20. [Details here.](#)

Top Image: Oscar Isaac in Joel and Ethan Coen's "Inside Llewyn Davis." Photo: Alison Rosa ©2012 Long Strange Trip LLC.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, December 4th, 2013 at 9:29 am and is filed under [Film](#), [Music](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.