

Mitch (Eugene Levy) and Micky (Catherine O'Hara) together at last.



SUZANNE TENNER, CASTLEROCK 2003

Pickin' & Pluckin'

Folkies' reunion?

A MIGHTY WIND: Written and directed by Christopher Guest. Written by Eugene Levy. Produced by Karen Murphy. Cinematography, Arlene Donnelly Nelson. Editor, Robert Leighton. Production design, Joseph T. Garrity. Costumes, Dorinda Rice Wood. Original music by Christopher Guest, John Michael Higgins, Eugene Levy, Michael McKean, Catherine O'Hara, Annette O'Toole, Harry Shearer, Jeffrey CJ Vanston. Starring Michael McKean, Bob Balaban, Ed Begley, Eugene Levy, Catherine O'Hara, Parker Posey, Fred Willard, Harry Shearer, Jennifer Coolidge, John Michael Higgins, Michael Hitchcock, Jane Lynch, Larry Miller. Warner Bros. Castle Rock, 2003. PG-13. 91 minutes.

Christopher Guest and the ensemble players who made *This is Spinal Tap*, *Waiting for Guffman* and *Best in Show* are at it again. In the faux documentary style Guest has created, the comedy comes out of the characters and the situation, but nobody plays it for laughs.

Except, that is, Fred Willard as the manager of the New Main Street Singers, Mike La Fontaine. Mike relishes telling jokes in such bad taste that after awhile I cringed in an involuntary Pavlovian response when he approached a live microphone. The gaga public relations team of Jennifer Coolidge and Larry Miller, who "share a single brain," are hilarious but not as over-the-top as the irrepressible Willard, whose commentator gaffes in *Best in Show* are great comic moments.

What Guest and co-writer Eugene Levy have come up with here is un-ironic comedy that celebrates the dorkiness of our national musical taste in bad folk music. Guest joins Harry Shearer and Michael McKean (both from *Spinal Tap*) to form the musical trio the Folksmen, who name their albums simply *Singin'*, *Pickin'*, *Hitchin'* and *Wishin'*. They would be pitiful if they weren't so earnest in their attempts to entertain and enlighten. "Old Joe's Place" comes with a neon sign joke I won't even try to explain to you.

The Folksmen and two other icons of the late 1950s, early '60s folk era come together for a reunion on public broadcasting (PBN). It's a memorial concert for the record sultan who made them famous, Irving Steinbloom, whose three children want it to be a tasteful affair. Nebbishy Jonathan (Bob Balaban) wants everything in New York City Hall to be perfect and safe.

The New Main Street Singers produce what the Folksmen look down on as commercial folk music — upbeat, cheery, vacuous numbers like "Sunny Side Up." Terry

Bohner (John Michael Higgins) and his wife, Laurie (Jane Lynch) are true followers of a spiritual path based on the ecstasy of color. We don't need to know any more about their sexual practices than they reveal before the big show.

Support singer Sissy Knox (Parker Posey) plays a former street urchin, daughter of an original Main Street Singer. Give Sissy cheerleader of the year award. She throws her self into every song without hitting one hip note. She's utterly un-self-conscious, no matter how corny the lyrics she belts out.

But it won't be a show unless Mitch (Eugene Levy) and Micky (Catherine O'Hara) agree to a reunion for one night. They made their name singing bittersweet love songs but split up when they were at the top of the charts. We hear that Micky freaked out at Mitch in the control room while recording, and Mitch gave as good as he got. At any rate, Micky is willing to sing at the reunion if Mitch can be persuaded.

That's the drama that ties these various colorful characters together. Levy plays once-charismatic Mitch with mood swings and a sorrowful overtone, while O'Hara plays Micky with grace and few pretensions. Their final duet of "A Kiss at the End of the Rainbow" makes even hardened movie critics misty-eyed.

Guest and Levy work as writers to create the characters. They give each actor her or his character's biography and traits. They tell the ensemble what each scene is about, where it needs to go. The actors improvise the lines as the scene is being shot. It's a brilliant way to work, possible only because these talented actors trust them, themselves and the other actors.

The music is written by the performers listed above in the credits, and O'Hara, Posey and Higgins had to learn the instruments they play in the film. No one lip syncs; these are live performances. Many people already know the Folksmen from their "Saturday Night Live" 1984 appearance when Shearer was on the show. But they have also made more recent television appearances on late-night "Letterman" and "Tonight" shows.

Too funny to miss, *A Mighty Wind* is now playing at Cinemark. **ew**

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