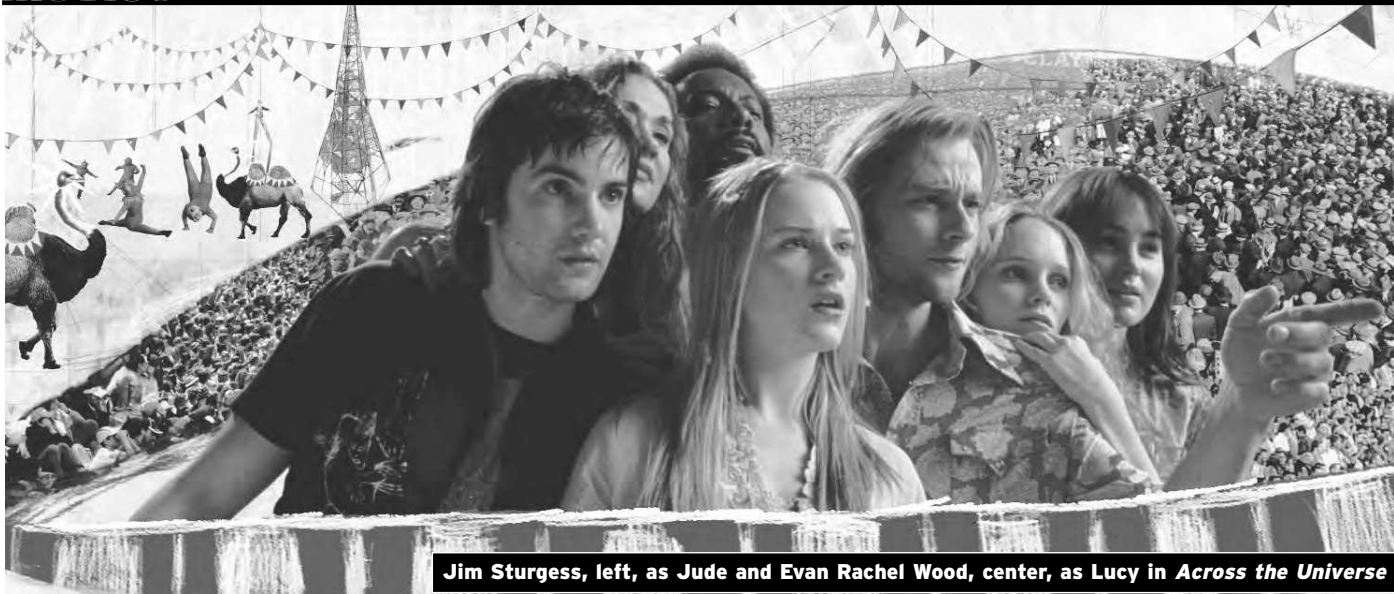




Jim Sturgess, left, as Jude and Evan Rachel Wood, center, as Lucy in *Across the Universe*

## Strawberry Fields

It's nothing (much) to get hung about

**ACROSS THE UNIVERSE:** Directed by Julie Taymor. Written by Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais. Cinematography, Bruno Delbonnel. Music, Elliot Goldenthal. Starring Evan Rachel Wood, Jim Sturgess, Joe Anderson, Dana Fuchs, Martin Luther and T.V. Carpio. Revolution Studios, 2007. PG-13. 131 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

At one point during *Across the Universe*, Jude (Jim Sturgess), the brooding hero of the film, says to Jo-Jo (Martin Luther), "That's the problem. I don't have one." Jude isn't talking about his father, or a passport, or any of the other various essentials he lacks. He is talking, in fact, about a

cause to fight for, and how not having one makes him uninteresting to Lucy (Evan Rachel Wood), the cause-ridden girl he loves. But the sentiment also describes the fundamental problem of *Across the Universe*, which — like the universe itself, come to think of it — lacks a discernible central purpose or design to unite its various (and variously interesting) set pieces into an apprehensible whole. *Universe* is a lush, ambitious, frustrating and — worst of all — occasionally dull film that reinterprets 33 Beatles songs to tell an otherwise conventional love story.

In the first of dozens of parallels between the

trajectory of the Beatles and the film itself, Jude departs Liverpool, England, for America during the 1960s. (*Universe* occasionally, but not often, presses its references too hard.) Jude touches down at Princeton University, where he finds his dad, whom he's never met, working as a janitor. Jude falters, fearing that his hardscrabble Liverpoolian life has followed him out of Liverpool. Hovering around campus, Jude is befriended by Max (Joe Anderson), whose sister Lucy (Evan Rachel Wood) isn't single, but you get the feeling she will be. A war is on, and the world is changing. Not wanting to fall into conformist lives, the three of them (along with several others) move to an apartment in Greenwich Village. *Universe* doesn't expend much energy on character development; instead, it assumes our familiarity with figures both historical (Janis Joplin) and fictional ("dear" Prudence) to dress

up what are basically stock interpretations: the college dropout, the destructive artist, the political idealist and so on.

For a while, for being so episodic and unintegrated, *Universe* is a pleasant, even exciting musical ride best enjoyed if not taken too seriously. But the inspired moments — the zydeco version of "I've Just Seen a Face" in a bowling alley, or the version of "Come Together" with Joe Cocker — too often are followed by decadent, overwrought numbers, such as the draft center debacle visited upon Max. As the film becomes more overtly political, it becomes more confusing and, therefore, less enjoyable. A sense that this *Universe* has no serious points to make kept nagging at my sensibilities. At its worst, history is just a plaything here, a shape over which to drape fashion and style. I felt that the serious issues of the 1960s, like civil rights and the struggle for peace, were merely vehicles for the music, rather than the other way around.

By the time Bono arrives, in a spirited reprisal of Timothy Leary, the film quite literally is adrift, with a Kesey-esque day-glo bus having deposited our cast at the camp of Mr. Kite (Eddie Izzard). Like Bono, Izzard is up for his role, and some impressive hallucinations ensue. But after two hours of yearning by this beautiful, poly-ethnic cast, what has it all been for? It's the lack of an answer that keeps *Universe* from being a truly powerful film. Instead, it's merely interesting. More self-important than important, *Universe* wants to take us interesting places. Occasionally, it does. But for the most part it's a lot of flapping about, without much flight. **EW**

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