



Poppy Cross (Sally Hawkins) in *Happy-Go-Lucky*

# Sing Out

Meet Poppy Cross, London's chirpiest bird

**HAPPY-GO-LUCKY:** Written and Directed by Mike Leigh. Cinematography, Dick Pope. Music, Gary Yershon. Starring Sally Hawkins, Eddie Marsan and Alexis Zegerman. Miramax, 2008. R. 118 minutes. ★★★★★

Amid the sedans and scooters of North London bicycles Poppy (Sally Hawkins), the irrepressible schoolteacher who propels *Happy-Go-Lucky*. The scene, like its star, is jubilant; Poppy may as well be cycling through the south of France. Onward she glides, a rainbow of yellows and blues in a world of cinder and brick. When her bicycle is stolen a few moments later, you expect the skies above Poppy to darken. A brief pout, perhaps, or a bit of foul language. Instead she says with joy undiminished, "I didn't get a chance to say goodbye." There's cheerful, and then there's Poppy, a 30-year-old pixie so ebullient that you can't help wondering if, like some tiny woodland creature, she keeps moving to avoid being preyed upon by the darker forces of nature.

Not so. Mike Leigh, the acclaimed writer/director of *Naked* and *Vera Drake*, has created another partially improvised triumph that, while far less bleak than his other dramas, places the same emphasis on a central character rather than traditional plot. The story of *Happy-Go-Lucky* is Poppy, one of the most realized film characters to appear in many years. In real life, Poppy is the stranger to whom you avoid saying too much, primarily out of fear that once she starts, she won't quit. And Poppy is quite a gabber, especially in places where nobody talks, like independent bookstores and chiropractors' waiting rooms. But in the hands of Sally Hawkins, Poppy is a

trampolining free spirit, an agreeable if highly distractible woman who makes a great teacher but a horrible pupil. Such is the case with her weekly driving lessons, which she takes about as seriously as eating ice cream.

A hugger and a kisser, Poppy is at her best around dullards, the overly serious, highly defensive types who are ideological, stupid or both. Poppy's driving instructor Scott (Eddie Marsan, *The Illusionist*) fits the bill. In one of three encounters that test Poppy's disposition — an abused student and a homeless man provide the others — Scott reveals himself as a deeply disturbed man who craves love but will resort to violence for it. Poppy's response is nothing short of heroic. The profoundly gifted Hawkins pushes Poppy through a series of emotions that is as stunning for its range as for its subtlety. The scene is tender, heartbreaking and miraculous.

*Happy-Go-Lucky* is a film about preserving a bearing, about maintaining a temperament that is at odds with the crush and flow of the world but which, in Mike Leigh's stunning vision of female survival, brings light to the dark places in which we live. Like me, you may find *Happy-Go-Lucky* slow to establish itself. You may also find yourself waiting for some terrible tragedy to befall Poppy, as films are nothing if not adept at bending themselves to our worst expectations. Leigh, in creating his best film since *Naked*, does the opposite. By the end of *Happy-Go-Lucky*, Poppy is stronger and wiser and more at ease in the world. For once, the good girls win. **EW**

*Happy-Go-Lucky* opens Friday, Nov. 14, at the Bijou.



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11:50\*, 12:45, 1:30, 2:15\*, 3:10, 4:00, 4:55\*, 5:35, 6:25, 7:20\*, 8:05, 9:00, 9:50\*, 10:35

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**\*HOUSE R**  
1:50, 7:25

**\*SOUL MEN R**  
12:10, 2:40, 5:00, 7:35, 10:05\*(EXCEPT THUR 11:20)

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1:55, 4:30, 7:20, 9:55

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12:05, 2:20, 5:10, 7:50, 10:30

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[11:35] 3:00, 6:45, 10:05

**THE DARK KNIGHT PG13**  
[11:55] 2:00, 4:00, 7:00, 8:00, 10:15

**BURN AFTER READING R**  
[12:05] 2:35, 4:50, 7:35, 9:55

**THE HOUSE BUNNY PG13**  
[12:00] 2:30, 5:05, 7:40, 10:10

**CITY OF EMBER PG**  
[11:50] 4:40, 9:40

**TROPIC THUNDER R**  
[12:40] 4:30, 7:20, 10:00

**MAMMA MIA! PG13**  
2:10, 7:05

**WALL-E G**  
[11:40, 12:50] 2:20, 3:50, 5:00, 6:50, 7:55, 9:25, 10:25

**PINEAPPLE EXPRESS R**  
[12:30] 4:20, 7:45, 10:20

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