



In order to understand my response to *Sing Street*, director John Carney's love letter to Irish teens starting a garage band in mid-'80s Dublin, I'm going to have to tell you a bit about myself.

I came of age in a small Northwest town at the ass end of the Cold War, when the threat of nuclear annihilation was about to be replaced by the plague of AIDS as the greatest goad to adolescent nihilism. Things weren't good at home, and as it went at home, so it seemed to go with the world.

As a smart, restless high school student with increasingly manic-depressive tendencies, I was slouching toward despair until two things literally saved my life: working on

the school newspaper and joining a punk rock band.

The student newspaper taught me the real value of work and of attaching my energies and talents to something bigger than myself, but it was singing in a punk band that completely cracked open the hardening husk of my discontent. Suddenly, my yearning and frustration had an outlet, and I began to find a creative voice. What's more, my bandmates became my brothers, a gang of ragtag suburban brats whose unifying theme was the unbounded ambition and thrill of making really loud music.

In *Sing Street*, Carney (*Once*) taps that thrill in a very intimate way, revealing those small moments of triumph that arrive when a band of misfits picks up instruments and

starts making noise. We meet Conor (Ferdia Walsh-Peelo), a shy kid whose home life is going to shit as a wallowing economy forces his parents to place him in a cheaper Catholic school. Conor's slacker older brother, Brendan (the excellent Jack Reynor), tutors him on the deeper implications of great music, after which Conor gets the idea of starting up his own band, partly to get the attention of a waifish dropout, Raphina (Lucy Boynton).

The film follows a trajectory that is utterly rote and predictable, and it wraps the story in a rosy glow of nostalgia and heroic overcoming that recalls, at times, the pubescent schmaltz of John Hughes' worst moments. And yet, despite its overly sentimental tendencies (no garage band gets that good that fast), *Sing Street* gets so much right: the ragged, fumbling beginnings of musicians learning to be musicians; the hard work and heady joy of songwriting; the evolution of identity, as imitation becomes authenticity; and, most importantly, the uplifting effects of art, as lost kids come to find a meaning and purpose that is sorely lacking in the rest of their lives, including school.

In a very real, very emotional way, *Sing Street* brought home to me the profound impact being in a band had on me — and, I would venture, any floundering kid — in permanently altering my course in life. Watching the movie, tears welled up in my eyes, not of sadness but of a cosmic and slightly sorrowful gratitude for the way a direct, furious involvement in music granted me a reason for being.

Sorrowful because, as a society, we seem to be losing in a very disastrous way our understanding that fostering creativity in young people — in all people — ties us to our better angels and our finest instincts as a species. My band was kicking against all the usual pricks, but at least we still had art programs in our schools.

Then again, wherever there's the possibility of a pissed kid in a basement with an amp and a shitty guitar, there's still hope. They can't take that away. (*Broadway Metro*)



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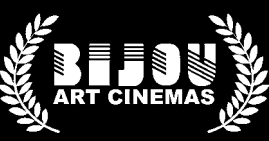
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