

Movie Review: 'Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story'

by James Hebert

Johnny Cash once got the stuffing knocked out of him by an enraged ostrich named Waldo, breaking five ribs. Now a counterfeit Cash comes along to throttle the singer a bit more.

'WALK HARD: THE DEWEY COX STORY' - Dewey (John C. Reilly, center) is a rock 'n' roll animal hanging with some wild pals in the comedy 'Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story.' CNS Photo courtesy of Gemma La Mana. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Not so nice to kick a fella while he's down (or, actually, dead), but in all fairness "Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story" isn't meant as a slap at the Man in Black. It's intended as a sendup of all those smarmy, formula-addicted flicks about tortured artists who find success, then calamity, then redemption through the graces of a good woman/higher power/agent.

There's no ostrich in "Walk Hard," but there is a pet giraffe, and the movie itself is like a zoo tour of primal,

rock 'n' roll wildlife, with Dewey (John C. Reilly) the guitar-strumming schlub who becomes king of the jungle.

The laughs hit like a case of the hiccups - erratic and occasionally a little uncomfortable. One inspired sequence has Dewey meeting a bickering, blithering version of The Beatles, and winding up on an LSD-sponsored trip through the "Yellow Submarine" cartoon gone loco.

Since this is partly a Judd Apatow movie (the "Knocked Up" mastermind co-produced it and wrote the script with director Jake Kasdan), there's also an extended shot of a character's naked man-parts hovering over Dewey's shoulder as he talks. Just because.

All that aside, there's still the fact that "Walk Hard" - especially early on - is a nearly scene-by-scene sendup of "Walk the Line," the 2005 film about Cash's life and times.

The new movie opens with a gleefully graphic depiction of young Dewey accidentally hacking his brother in two with a machete. ("Dewey, I'm cut in half real bad," the stoic kid observes.)

In real life, Cash's brother was sliced almost in half by a table saw when the two were boys and took a week to die. The tragedy haunted Cash the rest of his days. "Walk the Line" failed to play that for laughs.

In that light, "Walk Hard" defies a fundamental rule of spoofs: It's actually better if you're not too familiar with what's being lampooned.

The movie's kooky, freewheeling feel makes it a kind of raunchier cousin to the "Cannonball Run" movies of the early '80s, an impression reinforced by the whimsical mix of performers who show up in key roles and

cameos.

Jenna Fischer of TV's "The Office" revs it up as hot-blooded but high-principled Darlene, the June Carter Cash stand-in; she's joined briefly by sometime castmate and "Daily Show" alum Ed Helms.

"Saturday Night Live" contributes Kristen Wiig, Chris Parnell and ex-member Tim Meadows; Jack McBrayer from "30 Rock" pops up; and John Michael Higgins and Jane Lynch, fixtures of Christopher Guest's great mockumentaries, cruise through as a record producer and a demented TV host, respectively. (Their presence underlines the contrast between "Walk Hard" and the subtly funny style of Guest's own music-world spoof, "A Mighty Wind.")

Someone had the genius notion to cast Jack Black as a fatuous Paul McCartney, and Eddie Vedder, Jewel, Ghostface Killah and the Temptations all play themselves.

As for Reilly: His schnauzer looks and gonzo attitude lend plenty of comic zip, although he sometimes seems to be playing Will Ferrell playing Dewey Cox (there are two separate scenes of him running through the streets in underwear or less, shades of "Old School").

Reilly does have a way with a mike. And in the area of tearing plumbing fixtures out of walls, he way outpaces Joaquin Phoenix's work in "Walk the Line."

It's that kind of comedy. Everything plus the bathroom sink. Or a dozen of them.

A Columbia Pictures release. Director: Jake Kasdan. Writers: Jake Kasdan, Judd Apatow. Cast: John C. Reilly, Jenna Fischer, Kristen Wiig, Tim Meadows, Chris Parnell. Running time: 1 hour, 36 minutes. Rated R.

2 stars.

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