

'Dewey Cox' plugged; rock spoof 'Walk Hard' gets laughs despite itself

by Norma Meyer

WEST HOLLYWOOD, Calif. - Hard-living faux music legend Dewey Cox, aka actor John C. Reilly, had already downed two shots of tequila on stage and wiped his sweaty face with towels that he then tossed to hooting fans. He'd also rocked the house with more than a dozen tunes, including his pro-midget ditty, "Let Me Hold You (Little Man)."

By encore time, the pompadoured, guitar-strumming, harmonica-blowing showboat was bare-chested and gyrating in the famed Sunset Strip club the Roxy, which according to the marquee outside changed its name to the "Coxy" for this one night.

"God bless you all! Good night!" Cox, er Reilly, shouted before throwing a kiss to the cheering, invitation-only throng. "We love you, Dewey!" some in the crowd screamed back.

It could've been a scene out of Reilly's new musical-biopic spoof "Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story," but it was the launch of a real-life road trip. To hype the movie and keep blurring the line, Columbia Pictures sent Dewey and his Hard Walkers band on a seven-city "Cox Across America" concert tour that even had them performing at Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The studio-orchestrated Dewey drumbeat started days earlier - those who joined his online fan club received souvenir pairs of his "tighty whitey" underwear signed "I Love You" on the rear. "Walk Hard," which draws heavily from "Walk the Line" and "Ray," both emulates and riffs on Oscar-baiting movies that chronicle the ups and downs of a music icon's life. Reilly, who proved he had pipes in his Oscar-nominated "Chicago" role, does his own singing in "Walk Hard" just like Joaquin Phoenix-as-Johnny Cash in "Walk the Line."

"The idea was to make fun of the type of movie that thinks it deserves an Oscar," said "Walk Hard" co-writer and producer Judd Apatow ("Knocked Up" "The 40-Year-old Virgin"). "These types of movies where there's always one big star chewing up the scenery, crying, laughing, having sex, beating people up, and the type of movie that looks so gorgeous, everything's all golden and the cinematography is perfect and it reeks of self-importance.

"And then after the fact we thought, 'Wouldn't it be hilarious if we had this big Oscar campaign and then

actually got nominated?" "

Apatow may be the newly anointed king of comedy, but he's not jesting about award-trolling. He says three "fake hit singles" from the movie's soundtrack - "Walk Hard" "Let's Duet" and "Beautiful Ride" - are being submitted to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as possible best song nominees. Unconventional ads aimed at academy voters are also running in the Hollywood trades ("For Your Consideration: In Every Category You Got" read one Variety ad showing a stoned, hippie-era, diaper-clad Dewey being arrested).

"We're both satirizing the entire Oscar season and whoring ourselves to be involved," Apatow wryly noted.

"I think it's hilarious," said Reilly, who did musical theater as a youth and once sang in his own blues band. Although not all the tunes made it into "Walk Hard," Reilly said he "recorded 40 original songs I think over the course of six months. That's more than some musicians' entire careers."

The singles that spanned Dewey's decades-long career had to be "great, funny and at the same time bad," Apatow said. Songwriters Dan Bern and Mike Viola composed most of the numbers, but other artists also contributed to Dewey's repertoire. Musician Marshall Crenshaw, who knows a thing or two about biopics - he played Buddy Holly in 1987's "La Bamba," - penned the title track, "Walk Hard."

Jenna Fischer of "The Office" plays Dewey's backup singer and second wife, Darlene, although that's not really her crooning in the double-entendre-loaded "Let's Duet." Los Angeles singer Angela Correa is Fischer's singing voice. Some big-name performers also lend credibility to the sendup - Jack White of the White Stripes portrays Elvis, and Lyle Lovett, Jewel, Jackson Browne and rap star Ghostface Killah have cameos doing Dewey's "Walk Hard." Even Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder presents Dewey with a lifetime achievement award.

Although the Man in Black was clearly the comedy's inspiration, Apatow said he and co-writer/director Jake Kasdan ("The TV Set") are goofing on the entire history of musical biopics such as "Coal Miner's Daughter," "The Buddy Holly Story" "La Bamba" and "Selena."

"I think there's a reason people keep making them," said Reilly. "There's something about that story structure that works - the rise, the fall, the rise again, the humble beginnings." Biopics also need childhood trauma, which in *Walk Hard* is young Dewey accidentally cutting his brother in half with a machete.

Apatow said he and Kasdan wrote the script with Reilly in mind. As a producer on *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*, Apatow heard Reilly sing and play guitar for a scene that got cut. Apatow said he knew Reilly had a "Roy Orbison-like voice" and the acting chops to make Dewey larger-than-life.

"If he had to cry, he really cried. That's what made us laugh. That's part of the joke, the overwrought performance," Apatow said.

Dewey's on-screen band members aren't the same accomplished musicians he took on the road. *Saturday Night Live* alumni Chris Parnell and Tim Meadows and Matt Besser of Comedy Central's *Upright Citizens Brigade* had crash courses in their instruments so in the movie they could "play" in sync to the soundtrack.

"The one thing that's depressing as a comedian to realize is that rock stars get groupies and comedians don't," Besser said. "We got as close as we could doing this movie, I guess."

Reilly apparently took his off-the-wall Dewey role to heart. Meadows recalls he was doing a final scene with the camera trained on him when Reilly strolled in out of the lens' view.

"The last take, John walked in and he was completely naked," Meadows said, with a who-knows-why? shrug.

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