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# Jul 8 FILM / Once Upon a Time in Film Scoring / Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story / Sean Woodward

Film ( / 2017 - posts / category / Film )

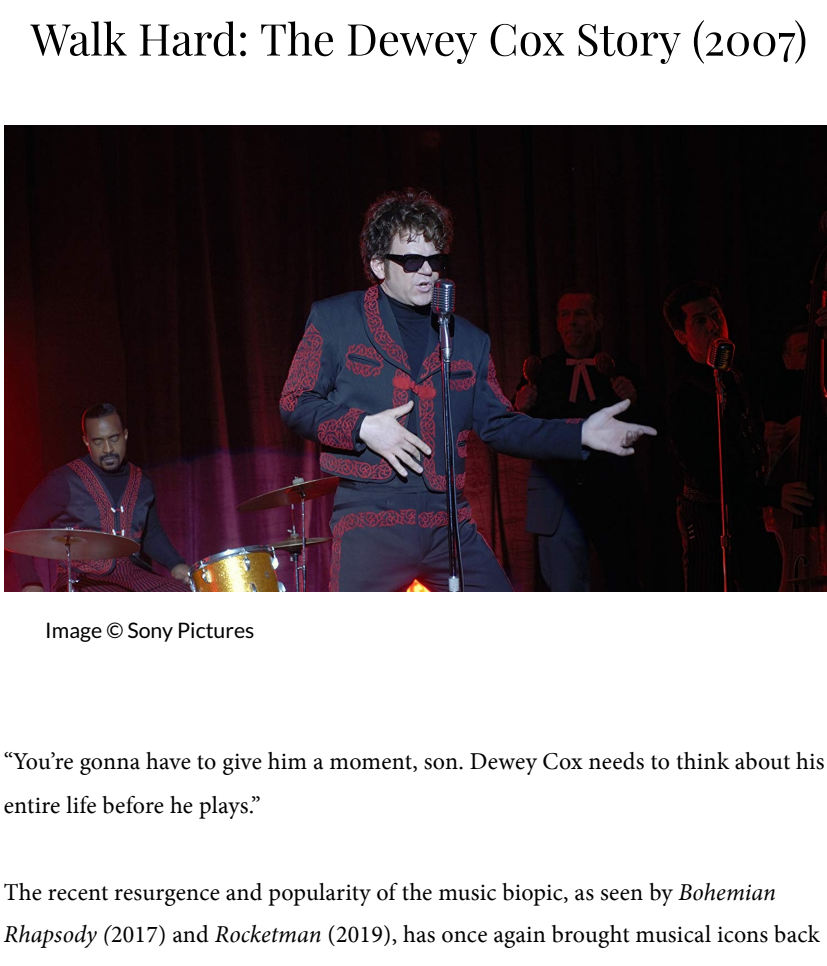


Image © Nathan Alan Schwartz

## Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story (2007)

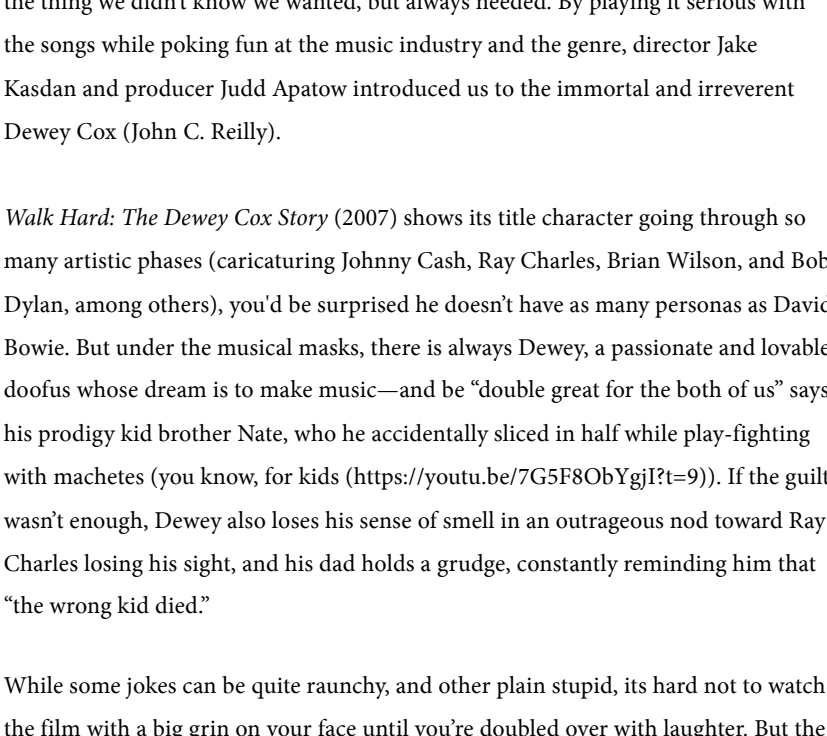


Image © Sony Pictures

"You're gonna have to give him a moment, son. Dewey Cox needs to think about his entire life before he plays."

The recent resurgence and popularity of the music biopic, as seen by *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2017) and *Rockstar* (2019), has once again brought musical icons back into the spotlight. From *The Doors* (1991) to *Control* (2007) to *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980) to *Straight Outta Compton* (2015), moviegoers have been treated to condensed versions of their favorite artists' histories, coupled with soundtracks of their greatest hits. With films like *Ray* (2004) and *Walk The Line* (2005) generating Oscar buzz, the music biopic appeared to hit its stride in the early 2000s.

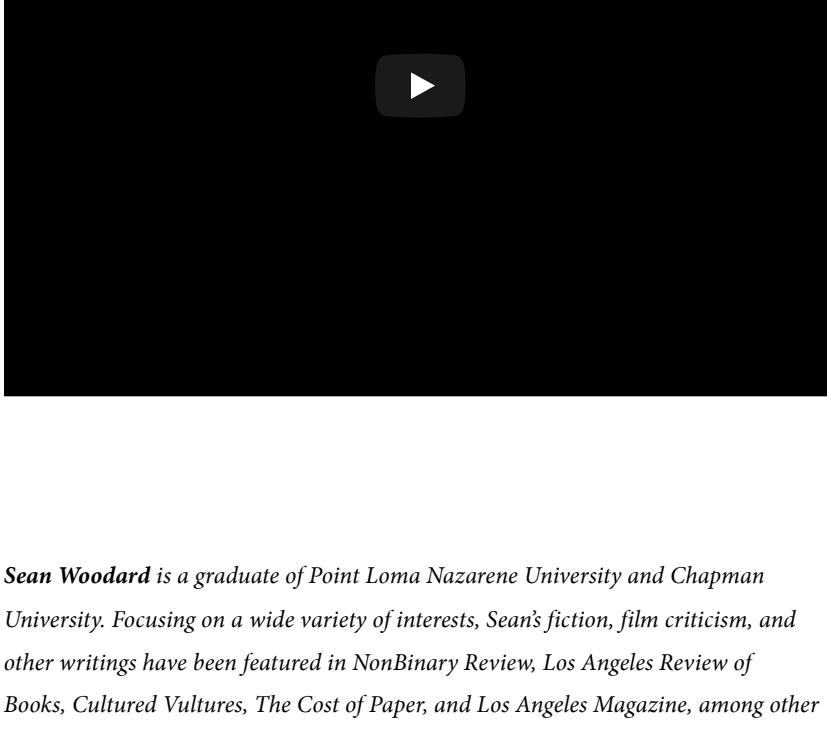
Soon after, the unlikely happened: a comedic spoof (<https://www.theringer.com/movies/2019/5/29/18642513/walk-hard-dewey-cox-oral-history-john-c-reilly-music-biopic-jake-kasdan-judd-apatow>) turned out to be the thing we didn't know we wanted, but always needed. By playing it serious with the songs while poking fun at the music industry and the genre, director Jake Kasdan and producer Judd Apatow introduced us to the immortal and irreverent Dewey Cox (John C. Reilly).

*Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (2007) shows its title character going through so many artistic phases (caricaturing Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Brian Wilson, and Bob Dylan, among others), you'd be surprised he doesn't have as many personas as David Bowie. But under the musical masks, there is always Dewey, a passionate and lovable doofus whose dream is to make music—and he is "double great for the both of us" says his prodigy kid brother Nate, who he accidentally sliced in half while play-fighting with machetes (you know, for kids (<https://youtu.be/7G5F80BvgIt?si=91>)). If the guilt wasn't enough, Dewey also loses his sense of smell in an outrageous nod toward Ray Charles losing his sight, and his dad holds a grudge, constantly reminding him that "the wrong kid died."

While some jokes can be quite ramshy, and other plain stupid, it's hard not to watch the film with a big grin on your face until you're doubled over with laughter. But the real spotlight is the music. *Walk Hard* has a damn good soundtrack: if you don't own it, do yourself a favor and purchase it right now.

At a school talent show, Dewey performs "Take My Hand," a song so sweet and innocent it causes teenagers to dance, young women to tear open their dresses, and a reverend to declare it the devil's music. Rejected, fourteen-year-old Dewey sets off with his twelve-year-old girlfriend (Kristen Wiig) to achieve his dream.

Dewey eventually catches the eye Jewish record executive (Harold Ramis) when he covers for the frontman of a band at an African-American nightclub. But when he goes into the studio, other record executives aren't impressed. He butchers a version of "That Amore" and is told to get out. He begs for one last chance and, against all odds (like Phil Collins' solo career), proves his grit by performing an original composition. His session players scramble to figure out the song's structure in real time and, just like that, the song is cut into wax and on its way to the top of the charts. The composition, "Walk Hard," is a full-blown Johnny Cash parody, right down to John C. Reilly's vocal delivery and the scene staging to mimic a similar scene from *Walk The Line*.



Following the success of his first single, Dewey soon meets Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley and produces hit after hit after his record. "Oh, My Darling" parodies Roy Orbison's soaring tenor range; "Guilty as Charged," ups the Johnny Cash ante during a montage of debauchery and drug abuse; and "Royal Jelly" hilariously skewers Bob Dylan's seemingly nonsensical lyrics (<https://youtu.be/xVP3ofaU6w>). Dewey even reworks his first hit in multiple styles—which reminds me how songs are

hoarded through different musical styles in Brian De Palma's *The Phantom of the Paradise* (<http://www.drunkmonkeys.us/2017/posts/2018/7/9/film-once-upon-a-time-in-film-scoring-phantom-of-the-paradise-paul-williams-brian-depalma-sean-woodard>)—most notably a punk rendition where he screams into the microphone and demands the song be played at an even faster tempo.

He then meets the love of his life, Darlene Madison (Jenna Fischer) and they embark on an affair-turned-love-story a la Johnny Cash and June Carter. Their duet is full of double entendres with perfectly placed beats in the middle of lyrical phrases to suggest a sexual connotation before the line is completed in a seemingly benign fashion. Such examples the opening stanza, "In my dreams you're blowing me / Some kisses / That's one of my favorite things to do." Others include the chorus phrase, "Let's duet / In ways that make us feel good;" and "Here I am a-sneakin' up behind you / You can always come in my back door."



Dewey then tries to expand his sound by dropping acid with the Beatles in India and directs over-the-top Brian Wilson-esque recording sessions that includes aberrational percussionists, a goat, and allegedly needs "an army of dilgeridoos. Fifty thousand dilgeridoos!" Later, he's offered the opportunity to host a "70s variety show, where he disco-fies his past hits and even performs David Bowie's "Starman" in a spaci suit.

As Dewey fails to come to terms with fame, the film's narrative cycles through the expected highs and lows. But the presentation of certain scenes to produce laughs prevent them from being trite. All things considered, *Walk Hard* reveals how formulaic biopics are to a fault: getting drugs from his drummer (<https://youtu.be/LZerb1f1as>) (Tim Meadows at his finest), being arrested, breaking up with his band, going to rehab, having a late-career comeback, but hilarious

homages, some of the most quotable jokes, and the seriousness the entire production took in crafting the music—including cameo by Jackson Browne, Eddie Vedder, Jewel, and Lyle Lovett to sell the final scene—make the film feel fresh. If the music had not been remotely good, then audiences wouldn't care as much about the film's main character. Everyone delivers, resulting in the movie being a beautiful ride from start to finish.



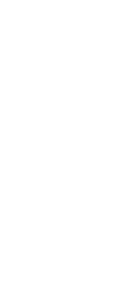
**Sean Woodward** is a graduate of Point Loma Nazarene University and Chapman University. Focusing on a wide variety of interests, Sean's fiction, film criticism, and other writings have been featured in *NonBinary Review*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Cultural Vultures*, *The Cost of Paper*, and *Los Angeles Magazine*, among other publications. He serves as the *Film Editor* for *Drunk Monkeys* and as a co-producer of the faith-based *Ordinary Grace* (<http://ordinarygrace.org/>) podcast. A native of Visalia, CA, he now resides in Orange County.

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