

Goin' nowhere

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [March 19, 2014](#) issue



Filmmakers Ethan and Joel Coen can entertain you with comedy (*O Brother, Where Art Thou*, *Raising Arizona*) or leave you gasping with their vision of the meaninglessness of life (*No Country for Old Men*, *A Serious Man*). Their film *Inside Llewyn Davis* mixes these two tendencies, but with the darkness far more determinative than the light.

The film is based loosely on 1960s Greenwich Village folksinger Dave Van Ronk. Llewyn Davis (played by Oscar Isaac) lives a decidedly unromantic existence as a starving artist. He goes from couch to couch, lodging with family and friends, then with friendly acquaintances and finally with strangers, alienating one after the other. He hauls along his guitar and a box of his records that he can't sell. In one scene, he slides the box of records under a table until it bumps into something: an almost identical box of LPs that his host has and also can't sell.

Davis is a good musician, but there are thousands like him, and they can't all succeed. More than skill and hard work is required. Luck, sex appeal, and commercial savvy play a role, and Llewyn has none of those.

The Coens have wryly joked that this film seems to have no plot so they added a cat. An unremarkable tabby escapes from the apartment of one of Llewyn's few well-heeled friends. He locks himself out of the house while chasing it and then carries the feline all over Manhattan. It jumps through the fire escape at another patron's dumpy apartment, and Llewyn spends the next few scenes searching for it. By the end of the film, the cat has wandered about a hundred blocks back to its owner.

Llewyn finally learns that the cat's name is Ulysses.

The Coens are geniuses at echoing classic texts unpretentiously. Even those who haven't read James Joyce's classic novel know it chronicles one day in the life of an ordinary Dubliner, with all his major and minor catastrophes and brilliant and humdrum thoughts. *Ulysses* has no plot, nor does *Inside Llewyn Davis*. Nor do many lives.

Llewyn is not a particularly nice guy. He blasts a couple who take him in when they ask him to play his music for them, accusing them of turning his profession into a parlor game: "This is my job. This is how I pay the bills." The irony, of course, is that he is homeless and unable to pay his bills. In one particularly bleak moment he takes to heckling a fellow folksinger on stage: "Show us your panties!" he yells at the older woman. It is hard not to cheer for her husband when he beats up Llewyn in the alley.

Carey Mulligan perfectly plays a folksinger named Mary who seems to be in the movie for no greater reason than to glare at Llewyn and bark "Asshole!" He can't even conduct a sordid affair with her properly. He has to ask Mary's boyfriend for a loan to cover an abortion of a child that may not be his. "Everything you touch turns to shit," Mary growls. And it's hard to object.

As Llewyn leaves the stage for the last time in the film, a young Bob Dylan ascends it, harmonica at the ready, his growly voice singing a song nearly identical to the one Llewyn just performed. As Llewyn heads to that alley to get his ass kicked, Dylan explodes into the pantheon of musical immortals. The humor here is dark indeed.

But Llewyn still calls forth our sympathies. He has a fondness for the cat, or at least for the people whose cat he lost. He is crestfallen when his car hits a dog. He tries to do right by those who help him; he just fails with remarkable regularity. As he steps into a snow puddle on a doomed pilgrimage to Chicago for a hoped-for audition and then tries to dry his socks at a diner, we feel for him. He's not a bad guy, nor a particularly good one either—just a poor schlub trying to make his way in a largely indifferent world.

The Coen brothers are never indifferent to a film's setting. They make the Gaslight Café in the Greenwich Village of the 1960s look smoky, desperate, and musically intoxicating. The subway stations whip by faster than Llewyn's missed opportunities. The walk-ups and condos of Manhattan are perfect—one soul-crushing hallway

narrows to a razor's edge and two doors appear like pincers, suggesting the end point for a sputtering career. This New York is drained of color and perpetually wintry—a place where some dreams are realized but most just go to seed.