

Not Fade Away: “Oh! Pleasant exercise of hope and joy”

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Written and directed by David Chase

The 1960s were something of a golden age. Everything seemed possible, life was about openness, flexibility and promise, and revolution—artistic, sexual and political—was in the air. “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive/But to be young was very heaven!” as the poet Wordsworth has it (also see headline).

Anyone who subscribes to this simplistic notion had better read no further.

Not Fade Away concerns itself with Douglas Damiano (John Magaro), a high school and then college student, and his friends living in suburban New Jersey in the mid-1960s. Douglas lacks a good deal in terms of personality and identity when the film begins (shortly after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in late 1963). He has plans to join the military. It is not long, however, before our hero has caught the spirit of the times, grown his hair long and starts listening to the Rolling Stones, among others.

Douglas and his friends form a rock ‘n’ roll band and vaguely aspire to make a career out of music. This and other matters bring Douglas into conflict with his angry and opinionated father (James Gandolfini), a small store owner. When Douglas, more or less accidentally, becomes the band’s lead singer, the pretty girl he yearns for, Grace (Bella Heathcote), begins to notice him.

Internal conflicts beset the band, and the lead guitarist leaves. Grace’s sister Joy (Dominique McElligott) is drawn to drugs and bohemianism, and her straitlaced parents have her committed. Douglas has more fights with his father and family and threatens to leave for the West Coast. The band auditions for a record producer. This and that happens. Various obstacles arise—in the end, fatal ones—to the band’s success.

The period of the mid-1960s through the early 1970s

continues to exercise endless fascination for certain people, especially members of the generation that matured in those years and still consider themselves and their experiences rather remarkable.

According to one calculation, 1,000 films, documentaries and television series or episodes devoted to the 1960s have been made since 1990. How many of them shed much light on those times? *Not Fade Away* is not a very good, coherent or deep-going film. David Chase (born David DeCesare in 1945), who wrote and directed it, grew up in New Jersey and played drums (like Douglas) in various local bands, before giving up music for a career in film and television (most famously, as the creator of *The Sopranos*). Chase tells interviewers there are “semi-autobiographical” elements in his film.

The film has its moments. Although Gandolfini’s character is a walking stereotype for much of *Not Fade Away*, a mean-spirited, narrow bigot apparently, he shows signs of greater depth and breadth as the work progresses. He contracts cancer, and the prognosis is not good. The scene in which he discreetly hands Douglas a wad of bills, as the latter leaves for California, knowing he is unlikely to see his son again, is genuinely touching: the dismal suburban street, the patches of snow, the sadness. Also affecting is the scene in which Douglas and Grace arrive at the Pacific Ocean: the sun, the sea, apparent freedom.

For the most part, however, *Not Fade Away* is content to slip innocuously and unremarkably from one rather undeveloped moment to the next. This is a film that makes the mistake of substituting numerous *references* to cultural-political phenomena (the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, Bob Dylan, John Mayall, Leadbelly, Bo Diddley, Robert Johnson, *The Twilight Zone*, Orson Welles’ *Touch of Evil*, Martin Luther King and the civil

rights movement, the Vietnam War, the “summer of love” (1967), etc.) for the more difficult task of making sense of them.

To explain the period in question, or any period, an artist has to be equipped with more than a good memory and a series of impressions. He or she has to have some sort of worked out theory about the time, its relation to preceding events and to the present.

In so far as Chase has a notion about the 1960s, it seems to be that popular music was terribly important “to people my age at that time. Everything was filtered through that,” as he told one interviewer. He explained to another, “I wanted it [the film] to be first and foremost about the music that they [the band members] were trying to learn and appreciate.”

This is not much to go on, although that doesn’t stop many from trying to go on it. The problem does not derive, first and foremost, from the artists. To the extent that the late 1960s and early 1970s are identified with various trends in popular music, and that many *at the time* thought the music of the day was a defining characteristic, points to the essential shallowness of the “revolutionary” culture, politics and protest of that era.

Again, those participating were not centrally to blame, they were to a certain extent victims of history, but a variety of great political and social questions were left entirely untouched by the radical student and anti-war movements and associated cultural expressions. Partly as a result, in nine out of ten cases, the “street fighters” of 1968 (and would-be rock ‘n’ roll stars, for that matter) went on to successful careers in law, finance, politics, journalism, academia, dress manufacturing, computer technology, real estate and so on, not leaving much behind to show for their earlier efforts. A nostalgic concentration on the music of the day, in effect, is a backhanded way of revealing how little was accomplished in other spheres.

Most of the characters in *Not Fade Away*, including Douglas and his bandmates, are not particularly appealing figures. They tend to be unpleasant, selfish and trivial. They whine and fall out over almost nothing. They’re also somewhat lazy and, despite everything, pleased with themselves. One has no overwhelming desire to spend much time in the company of any of them, Grace perhaps excepted, and no great concern about what becomes of them.

If this is an honest picture, and one assumes Chase is

being true to his memories, it points again to some of the problems of the middle-class “60s generation” (including its subsequent evolution), whether that was the filmmaker’s intention or not.

Chase indicates that a central concern for him is the conflict between the desire for security, represented by home and family, with all their contradictions, and the lure of freedom. “Those two things are constantly pulling,” he says. This choice is only open to those for whom home and family life are economically and even emotionally “secure.” A good many unstated social assumptions are lodged in the comment.

Writing about *An Education* and *Pirate Radio* in 2009, we noted, “The writers and directors of both these limited films thus have this much in common: they tend to reduce the rebelliousness of the 1960s to the desire of sections of the middle class, with whom they identify, for a more comfortable, more expansive existence. Small change indeed.”



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