

Happy FKN Sunshine: Life in a decaying industrial town

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Happy FKN Sunshine, directed by Derek Diorio and co-written by Diorio and Ryan Keller, is a comedy-drama about members of a high school band searching for a way out.

The story is set in an unnamed industrial town in northern Ontario (it was filmed in North Bay), following mass layoffs at the pulp mill, the town's main employer.

Will (Matt Close), a teenager whose angry father is among the newly unemployed, plays guitar in a heavy metal band. He hopes that if only the band can grow their social media base, they might have a real chance at success, "like, big-time, even." To kick things off, his surly but supportive sister, Ronnie (Mattea Brotherton), buys him an expensive electric guitar with the proceeds from her "weed" sales. Their next step is to find a bass player, but there are slim pickings.

While walking home from school, Will encounters Artie (Dana Hodgson), a lonely social reject who foolishly lies about encounters he claims to have had with famous musicians (we later learn this is a way for him to escape his own family traumas). He is, however, a stellar bass guitarist. Over a round of mini-golf, Will suggests to his bandmates that Artie join their group, but Vince (Connor Rueter), the lead singer and nearly always a menacing bully, flatly rejects the idea: "People are gonna look at us and think we are f----- up as he is." He points his putter aggressively at Will's chest, and says, "Stupid f----- idea."

However, the band members grudgingly agree to let Artie play with them temporarily, as he also has access to a desperately needed jam space that his uncle, local music shop owner Fast Eddy (Ted Dykstra), has fashioned in his basement. Artie must agree to the caveat that he cut out the tall tales and generally keep his mouth shut.

Ronnie volunteers to handle the new band's management and Fast Eddy, impressed with their skills, offers to coach them. As it happens, he's a semi-retired musician with connections to the Toronto music scene that he promises to leverage once the band improves. "You keep at it, I'll see about getting some big eyes on you."

The band begins to find their footing and Fast Eddy

secures them their first "big break"—a gig at a pub out of town, and he's arranged for his old friend, big-shot Toronto producer, Jimmy (Wes Williams), to attend. Meanwhile, the band's interpersonal tensions reach the breaking point.

Director Diorio explains in his notes that *Happy FKN Sunshine* is "a story about the last chapter in the life cycle of an industrial town told through the eyes of the town's working-class youth." He observes that northern Ontario and Manitoba are today "littered with small towns that sprang up around pulp and paper mills in the heyday of the mid-late 20th century forestry industry. People flocked to these towns on the promise of stable high paying jobs and a real future for themselves and their children. But the economy changed in the 1990's and many mills began closing. Suddenly, many of the children of the mill-workers found themselves without the chance of the bright future that their parents once thought they had."

This is serious and legitimate subject matter. To the filmmakers' credit, they have made the plight of working class youth in an economically devastated community their central focus. Such phenomena go virtually untreated in contemporary North American filmmaking. The people in these towns don't count as far as the entertainment industry is concerned. More generally, the painful socio-economic dimensions of life are rarely made prominent in contemporary Canadian or international cinema, and are even more rarely made the basis of feature-length films.

Given the difficult climate for independent filmmaking, in which funding is rare and limited in quantity when it does arrive, this relatively bold choice of subject and theme must come from a sincere concern about the hard-pressed young people whose lives are represented in *Happy FKN Sunshine*.

The film's premise—teenagers languishing in a devastated town find refuge in music making, or try to—is certainly an intriguing one with genuine possibilities. There are occasionally endearing and comical moments, especially between the principal character, Will, and his ornery sister, Ronnie. The viewer genuinely feels sympathy at times for the characters and the oppressive conditions they face.

Unfortunately, the more complex social and psychological questions involved are not dealt with in *Happy FKN Sunshine*, which ends up encouraging the viewer to draw superficial and pessimistic conclusions.

Throughout, Diorio's film strikes an unnecessarily and artificially abrasive tone. Much of the behaviour and dialogue is incessantly abusive, unconvincingly so. Under the blows of poverty, such moments are inevitable, but here the abuse feels excessive, as though the filmmakers were trying to prove a point, and tends to eclipse the characters' more sympathetic features. Hardship produces various responses, including inter-personal cruelty, but it can also generate self-sacrifice and compassion. Otherwise, life for the oppressed would be almost impossible.

The overly harsh approach may be an act of rebellion on part of the filmmakers against the ordinarily "genteel," sanitised environment of Canadian (Toronto) cinema. Unfortunately, it is also in keeping with a certain school in contemporary filmmaking that sees in this kind of "kitchen sink" vulgarity (even the title includes an obscenity), either a transgressive quality, or a device, clumsy at it is, for supposedly illustrating the "unpleasant but unvarnished truth."

The story's drama idles along blandly much of the time, never really rising to the occasion that seems warranted by the subject matter. There is too heavy a reliance on poorly worked-out clichés, so the characters' reactions often feel either overblown and lacking plausible motivation or come off as inappropriately chilly and indifferent. Overall, the film's energy is animated too much by anti-social hostilities and bitter or passive resignation.

If the backward conditions that *FKN Sunshine* explores—the mass unemployment, lack of opportunity, substance abuse—are taken as the filmmaker seems to intend as all-encompassing immutable facts of life, then one is left with a picture of almost hopeless dysfunction and misery.

But this is a simplistic and one-sided picture. The failure to adopt a more profound, perhaps healthier view of social life reflects not only the artistic weaknesses of this particular film but the broader political and historical issues and social pressures confronting artists working at present in Canada and beyond.

Decades of political and cultural stagnation, characterized by the suppression of the class struggle by the corporatist trade unions, have taken their toll on artists too. The impressionism that takes the consequences of betrayal and isolation of workers' struggles as signs of apathy or resignation has led many artists astray. It has encouraged certain layers, already susceptible to such ideas, to view the working class as a passive social force, incapable of acting

in its own interests. All sorts of post-modernist and Frankfurt School conceptions have fed into this. These social processes have had a cumulative impact on the psyche of the artists, who tend to take immediate reality as eternal.

In any event, those stagnant conditions are now breaking up, with considerable speed. The soaring cost of living, social inequality, war are thrusting workers globally into explosive struggles—from the mass battles in France and Sri Lanka to the most recent struggles by North American dockworkers.

Crucially, artists must sensitise themselves to this new upsurge and its immense challenges. There are many problems, including the despair of certain layers, but the artist has the responsibility to go beneath the surface and orient toward the underlying currents.

Workers in the pulp and paper industry didn't simply roll over and play dead in the face of the companies' assault on jobs and living conditions in the 1970s and afterward. They fought tenaciously to defend themselves and their families.

In 1975–76, workers in the Eastern Canada pulp and paper industry led an industry-wide strike over plummeting wages in the face of skyrocketing inflation, which led to mills across the country shutting down and the prospect of a general strike. The Canadian Paperworkers Union was pressured by the workers into seeking a 41 percent pay increase from employer Abitibi Paper Company in a one-year contract, which the union ultimately betrayed six months later, negotiating a three-year contract that secured a fraction of the workers' wage demands.

As late as 1989–90, workers fought a bitter battle with Nordfibre in North Bay, the setting for *Happy FKN Sunshine*, that lasted for months, after the fibreboard manufacturer announced a two-year wage freeze and the rollback of employee benefits.

The betrayals of these struggles by the union bureaucracies helped create the economic conditions and much of the demoralization that Diorio's film tends to wallow in. Without a grasp of history, including the history of popular moods and sentiments, it is hard to make headway.

Ultimately, the big historical and social questions raised by this betrayal of the paperworkers and other episodes in the class struggle in Canada and elsewhere, if taken up seriously by artists, will help illuminate the path out of the difficulties that make possible the passive and demoralised outlook reflected in *Happy FKN Sunshine*.



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