



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: Authenticity as a ‘Song Sung Blue’

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 01.05.26



YouTube/Focus Features

Last week, I found myself drawn into a darkened theater to see “Song Sung Blue,” lured there by a trinity of temptations that would have made even the most discriminating aesthete surrender: first, the luminous Kate Hudson, all golden-haired radiance and that peculiar American sparkle; second, Hugh Jackman, whose presence on screen possesses the gravity of a minor god; and third – perhaps most shamefully, though I confess it without remorse – my own weakness for Neil Diamond’s music, a species of sentimental grandeur that I should have outgrown.

But there was something else, too, recognized only after I purchased my ticket and settled into the velvet dark. The U.S. has built itself a curious cathedral of cinema about rock stars and musicians – a veritable canon, really – filled with tales of rise and ruin, fame and its terrible cost, redemption sought and sometimes found. These films are distinctly, unmistakably *ours*, infused with that peculiar American mythology of self-invention. Yet they’re also

unexpectedly philosophical, grappling with questions that would have pleased the ancient Greeks: What does it mean to create art? To be consumed by one's own creation? To live authentically in a world of illusion?

The film opens with a semiotic trap: Jackman's face, close-up, cropped, magnified, denying us the comfort of context. The dark hair – whether dyed or a wig, a distinction that probably matters – signals our first confrontation with the impossible promise of authenticity. Mike – Jackman's character's name – delivers his monologue, and we, the audience, construct our interpretation within the bounded frame we're given.

Then the reveal. The camera withdraws like a deity remembering its omniscience, and we discover the AA meeting, the circle of witnesses, the liturgy of healing. Mike is a recovering alcoholic of long standing. Suddenly, he sings the titular song, "Song Sung Blue."

Why *this* song at *this* moment? The tune itself becomes a kind of pharmakon (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pharmakon>), both poison and cure, a lament paradoxically functioning as hope. Depression becomes consolation; the blue transforms into its own remedy. In the space of an AA meeting, where one confesses the self to reconstruct the self, what could be more appropriate than a song about song itself, about the strange alchemy by which sadness, when performed, becomes bearable?

Enter Hudson as Patsy Cline, wigged and magnificent, in a room crowded with a counterfeit Elvis, James Brown, and others. Here, the film achieves its properly vertiginous mise en abyme (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mise_en_abyme): we watch actors playing actors who portray performers. The real Hudson performs the fictional character who performs the historical Patsy Cline: three orders of simulation, a hall of mirrors where each reflection calls into question the substance of what it reflects.

Where, in this concatenation of performances, does the "real" reside? Or must we finally accept that there *is* no real, only iterations of the copy?

The mirror scene: Jackman, in his underwear, confronting his reflection as he assumes the Diamond persona for the first time. Mike *discovers* himself by becoming Other. The disrobing suggests vulnerability, yes, but also transformation: he sheds one costume – ordinary life – to assume another, a performed self understood not as something possessed but as something donned.

The casting functions as **paratext** (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paratext>), smuggling meaning into the narrative through accumulated cultural associations. Jackman: “Les Misérables,” certainly, but more crucially, “The Greatest Showman.” He is *already* the showman before the film begins.

Hudson’s stardom launched via “Almost Famous,” where she embodied the groupie, the lover orbiting the musician’s charisma. Now, older – the film does not conceal her age, instead making it central to the story – she plays the supporting role once more, loving the singer who commands center stage. The actors bring their histories; we cannot watch them innocent of what they’ve meant before.

The lawnmower scene: pure cinema. Mike pulls the cord; his heart falters; he nearly dies. He recovers. Stands. Pulls again. Both engines – mechanical and biological – roar back to life. The parallel editing of body and machine suggests ... what? That we are machines? That machines possess some life-force? Or that the will to continue, to start again despite breakdown, is what defines both the human and the engine, with resurrection enacted as routine maintenance?

Hudson’s character carries another mark of the body’s betrayal: she loses a leg in an accident and navigates the world of performance with a prosthetic limb. If all identity is prosthetic – something attached, adopted, assumed – then what’s the difference between the artificial leg and the artificial persona?

The amputation seems strangely fitting in a narrative about impersonators: she is literally incomplete, literally constructed from both organic and manufactured parts, yet her performance is no less “authentic” for this hybrid composition. Indeed, the prosthetic leg functions as the most honest metaphor: We are *all* assemblages, all cobbled together from what remains after loss, all performing wholeness with whatever materials we can find.

Milwaukee provides the geographic anchor, neither coastal nor southern, a blue-collar space where impersonation might flourish precisely because it’s distant from the glamour it mimics. Temporally, the film settles most comfortably in the 1980s, before edging into the 1990s as the story unfolds.

Jackman and Hudson are exceptional at their craft, which means they excel at convincing us that they are *not* acting, that what we witness is somehow authentic, even as the film systematically dismantles any notion of authenticity. They perform the impossibility of performance itself, making present what is absent, making real what is simulation, making “Song Sung Blue” both the problem and, somehow, improbably, the solution.

SONG SUNG BLUE - Official Trailer [HD] - Only in Theaters T...



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