



MOVIES

Review: Its voice is ragged, but ‘Hard Luck Love Song’ hits so many right notes



Even the losers get lucky sometimes — Sophia Bush and Michael Dorman star in the bare-knuckled “Hard Luck Love Song.” (Andrea Giacomini/Roadside Attractions)

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follow health and safety guidelines as outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and local health officials.

[Tom Petty](#) sang, “Even the losers get lucky sometimes,” and that’s about as succinctly as one can describe the richly detailed and fully inhabited “Hard Luck Love Song.”

This indie drama with winks of cockeyed humor stars Michael Dorman (unforgettably great in [Amazon’s brilliant “Patriot”](#)) as Jesse, a good-hearted guy who rolls into town smelling of blown shots. One of the many things we’ll learn about Jesse is the bad fortune that follows him is largely of his making, despite a sunny disposition and moments of genuine kindness. The director’s note describes him as “a deeply flawed everyman,” but he has talents not every man has and flaws that would sink most.

He isn’t here by accident. He hopes to reunite with his lost love, Carla ([Sophia Bush](#)), who has traveled a rough road of her own. It’s a shame to tell even that much, as the way information unfolds in the film is one of its pleasures — first-time feature director and co-writer Justin Corsbie’s storytelling can be lovely, slow-burningly tense or jarringly violent, whatever best serves the moment. You could call the filmmaking “lyrical,” and you’d be doubly right: The music-infused movie is both beautifully expressed and based on one particularly well-observed song, “Just Like Old Times” by [Todd Snider](#). Snider’s performance of the song during the closing credits reveals the surprising amount the film takes directly from it (I recommend *not* hearing the song before watching the film for just that reason).

Jesse’s fancy moves are sure to crash down upon him, but getting there is very much worth the trip. Dorman crafts a multidimensional character whose smile sometimes barely papers over a cry. He stops to enjoy kids going fully clothed into a motel pool and delightedly looks for the worm in a bottle of mezcal. He’s a dirty cocktail of charm, jealousy, regret, good intentions and bad mistakes.

All the featured players have their moments. Those clinging to [Dermot Mulroney’s](#)

“[My Best Friend’s Wedding](#)” days will be aghast at his appropriately 18-miles-of-bad-road persona in this one. Without spoiling what he does, [Brian Sacca](#) is excellent in a small role, and [RZA](#), of all people, materializes most memorably.

The script stays out of its own way while tossing off a few nuggets of bull’s-eye dialogue. Meeting again after so long, Carla cautiously allows, “You look great.” Jesse says, “Better than last time you saw me?” “Yeah, thank God,” she says. Laughing now at a terrible memory, he says, “It wasn’t exactly my time to shine.”

Corsbie, cinematographer Jas Shelton and production designer Marie Jach have built a run-down, little back-alley world in which everything feels lived in; nothing is too clean. Their bruised Austin, Texas, all but reeks of Budweiser, Marlboros and worn pool-table felt. Corsbie maintains a low thrum of tension under the romance after a threat emerges early on; even during moments of celebration, we’re bracing for that motel door to get kicked in. The rookie even pulls off a subtle, bravura, extended, unbroken take conveying a character’s mastery at a particular game.

“[Hard Luck Love Song](#)” is a happy but gritty marriage of material, filmmaker and star. Much is asked of Dorman, and he delivers all. “Patriot” fans will be glad to know he sings again, and quite differently than in that show. Bush excruciatingly conveys someone who should know better but finds herself unable to resist the gravitational pull. To let [Petty](#) tell us more: “I showed you stars you never could see / It couldn’t have been that easy to forget about me.”

'Hard Luck Love Song'

Rating: R, for language throughout, drug use, some violence and sexual references

Running time: 1 hour, 44 minutes

Playing: Oct. 15, AMC the Grove 14, Los Angeles; AMC Burbank; Laemmle Monica, Santa Monica; Regal Sherman Oaks; Laemmle

Playhouse 7, Pasadena; Laemmle NoHo 7,
North Hollywood; Laemmle Newhall, Santa
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