

Where have all the folkies gone?

by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [May 31, 2003](#) issue

In the hilarious, pitch-perfect Christopher Guest parody, *A Mighty Wind*, three 1960s folk bands participate in a reunion concert to memorialize the promoter who brought them to the public eye. Guest and co-writer Eugene Levy burlesque the most celebrated of the folkies. Michael McKean, Harry Shearer and Guest himself play the Folksmen, whose close harmonies, rambling didactic spiels and affable camp-counselor personalities recall the Kingston Trio.

The New Christy Minstrels return in the form of the New Main Street Singers, a tirelessly upbeat crew that has been reconstituted in the years since its initial break-up. Only one of the original musicians (Paul Dooley) still plays with them; the current roster includes the ex-doper daughter of one of his partners (Parker Posey), and a perky couple (John Michael Higgins and Jane Lynch) who practice a private religion built around the power of color. Best of all are Levy and Catherine O'Hara as Mitch and Mickey, whose partnership and romantic relationship broke up messily (he wound up in a psychiatric hospital). Their music--as well as O'Hara's Maritime accent--brings to mind the Canadian duo Ian and Sylvia, though their album covers are in the style of Peter, Paul and Mary.

Guest has carved out a unique niche for himself with his send-ups of unorthodox pockets of show business. He co-wrote Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap*, which chronicled the disintegration of a heavy-metal band. His directorial debut, *Waiting for Guffman*, was built around a community theatrical group. *Best in Show* spoofed the Westminster Dog Show.

Perhaps the closest analogy from another movie era to these straight-faced improvised vaudevilles would be the modestly produced musical comedies Paramount turned out in the 1930s with performers like the Marx Brothers, Bing Crosby, W. C. Fields, and Burns and Allen. Guest's troupe has a similar high-flying lunacy, an intense commitment to a comic vision so insular and Martian that you come out of their movies with the odd sensation that you're walking on your hands. His roster of freakishly gifted clowns includes Bob Balaban (appearing here as the

man who opts to eulogize his father with this Town Hall concert), who elevates fastidiousness to a personality disorder; Fred Willard (as a manager with spiked, dyed-blond hair and a riotously inappropriate sense of humor); Jennifer Coolidge (as a publicist with a German beer hall accent and cheeks the size of Bartlett pears); and Ed Begley Jr. (as a Swedish-born public-television producer whose conversation is peppered with Yiddish expressions). The cast has a collaborative genius.

Guest's movies differ from those Paramount nut clusters by having a delicate underlayer of humanity (except in the case of *Waiting for Guffman*, whose portrait of amateur thespians seemed to me a little mean-spirited). *Best in Show* clearly adored some of its fanatical dog owners, especially Levy and O'Hara as the outsiders who become surprise winners. When an injury prevents O'Hara's character from appearing on stage for the final round with her shih tzu, Levy, playing a man born literally with two left feet, is compelled to lead the pup around-and does so flawlessly, even elegantly. That kind of affection for the characters infuses all of *A Mighty Wind*, which is bizarrely touching in the second half, when the folkies take the stage.

The film culminates in the performance of Mitch and Mickey. Levy and O'Hara are locked into each other's rhythms, like Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca or Harvey Korman and Carol Burnett, and O'Hara in particular seems sealed inside her comic creation, revealing unexpected depths. (Her performance is worthy of comparison to Lily Tomlin--the highest compliment you can pay a revue comic.)

The duo's biggest hit was a love ballad that, in the final chorus, paused long enough for Mitch to lean over and kiss Mickey on the lips--a historic moment when they first performed the song on television. The recreation of that kiss in the reunion concert gently stylizes a cross-current of remembered feelings, to which are added a mix of new ones from Mickey: bemusement, protective anxiety, tender resignation. *A Mighty Wind* is full of inspired touches: Balaban's worry over the lights hanging (precariously, he thinks) over the audience; Levy's deadpan appraisal of O'Hara's husband's electric-train collection; Jane Lynch's recitation of her porno-movie past (which has the innocent tone of a prom-night anecdote); the way Deborah Theaker, as Balaban's neurotic sister, sits lopsided in her front-row seat like a discarded marionette and applauds with mad passion for her dad's favorite folk stars. But it's the Mitch-and-Mickey kiss that stops the show and provides the most wonderful moment in movies so far this year.