

'Blue Like Jazz' films aims to be Christian, not 'cheesy'

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(RNS) Do not confuse the upcoming film "Blue Like Jazz" with Christian market movies like "Fireproof" or "Courageous."

"A Christian movie genre has formed. Our first goal with this movie is that we didn't fit into this genre," said director Steve Taylor.

Author Donald Miller, who wrote the 2003 best-selling book "Blue Like Jazz," from which the movie was adapted, agrees.

"We wanted to show that movies about the faith struggle that millions of Americans deal with don't have to be cheesy," he said. "They don't have to have bad actors. They don't have to be low budget production. They can compete with other films at the box office."

"Most Christian artists if we're really honest with ourselves, we want to be accepted by other creatives who are not people of faith, just general market folks."

If it's acceptance they are looking for, Taylor, 54, and Miller, 41, have found a measure of it in the secular world. The film will be distributed by Roadside Attractions, which markets such decidedly non-religious films as "Winter's Bone" and "I Love You, Phillip Morris," an unusual endorsement for a faith-based product.

"Blue Like Jazz" premiered March 13 to respectful reviews at the South By Southwest festival in Austin, Texas, an increasingly important venue for independent films. The film hits theaters April 13.

Loosely adapted from Miller's autobiography, the film follows a young Texan teen as he leaves his conservative church and enrolls in the aggressively secular and whimsically liberal Reed College near Portland, Ore. His faith is tried as much by the

hypocrisy of his home church as by the new ideas around him.

Taylor, well known in contemporary Christian music circles, has made a career out of addressing church hypocrisy.

"I think it always comes better when it's from the inside than from the outside," he said. "So many of our critics think we are too blind or dumb to know (hypocrisy)."

That — in addition to the film's swearing, drinking, and a lesbian character — is why Miller expects more pushback from the evangelical world than from secular critics. "The average Christian wants clean answers, clean characters — 'I was bad then Jesus happened to me, now I became good.' Not, 'I grew up in church and I saw a lot of hypocrisy and I walked away and I realized God exists outside of church.'"

Selling over a million copies and spending months on bestseller lists, "Blue Like Jazz" revolutionized the evangelical world when it was released in 2003.

At one point, a chain of Southern Baptist bookstores flagged Miller's book — and several others — with a special warning to readers that the contents "could be considered inconsistent with historical evangelical theology."

"I remember thinking that this guy understood the Jesus I worshipped," said Mike Kruger, 36, of Washington, D.C. "He got the type of Christianity I was seeking. I didn't need the sanitized Jesus that the evangelical church of the 1990s and early 2000s was pedaling. I wanted a real Jesus. One who was messy and could deal with the messiness of my world."

Like thousands of others, Kruger donated to help fund the movie after an appeal on the crowd-funding website Kickstarter.com. More than 4,000 people donated more than \$350,000 dollars, the highest response Kickstarter has seen to date.

Eugene Cho, 41, the lead pastor of Quest Church in Seattle, understands the appeal.

"Even if you might not agree with everything, there's something about how the author, Donald Miller, is really welcoming people into conversation and thought that really appeals to people," he said.

Miller hopes the movie has similar impact as the book, showing people they aren't alone in difficult spiritual struggles.

"There are other people who deal with these things: the space between the church and the world, the pulls from either side," he said. "Not just the church and the world, between a mom and dad, between love and sex, between faith and doubt. All those places. More people than we know live in those spaces."

Cho sees another message encouraging all Americans, not just religious people, to interact with groups different than themselves.

"We tend to live in this very polarized world and we're seeing this more so in this election season," he said. "Particularly from a religious point of view, we tend to eventually gather with those who think like us, look like us, feel like us. It doesn't do us any good."