

# The Neil Diamond-inspired ‘Song Sung Blue’ hits all the wrong notes

**BY MARK KENNEDY**  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

The story of Mike and Claire Sardina — a struggling husband-and-wife Neil Diamond tribute act from Milwaukee — was never the stuff of Hollywood movies. Unfortunately, it’s been made into one.

Hugh Jackman and Kate Hudson are slumming to play the slightly batty couple in the big-hearted but misguided “Song Sung Blue,” a baffling adaptation of a very moving 2008 documentary.

Director and writer Craig Brewer isn’t certain where the through line of the movie really is so he explores working-class pressures, adds a rom-com, swerves into tragedy and drug addiction and then lets Jackman and Hudson sunnily perform some 20-odd songs, turning “Song Sung Blue” into a melo-drama-meets-holiday-sing-along.

Hollywood should have stayed away. The original documentary by Greg Kohs — who gets a producer credit this time — was about two artists who, despite facing foreclosure notices and insurance denials, still showed up for gigs, chasing that showbiz high, even when one suffered an amputation. The couple and their blended family came across as somewhat delusional but sweet and their tragedies seemed almost preordained. It was a small story.

Jackman and Hudson try to lose themselves in these parts. He walks around in sagging tighty-whities, with dirty fingernails and a missing tooth, and she works hard to be drab. The filmmakers ape many of the signatures of the documentary, like the sight of airplanes rumbling over the Sardinas’ house. In too many ways, “Song Sung Blue” feels like an act of karaoke.



Focus Features

This image released by Focus Features shows Kate Hudson, left, and Hugh Jackman in a scene from “Song Sung Blue.”



Focus Features

This image released by Focus Features shows Hugh Jackman and Kate Hudson, right, in a scene from “Song Sung Blue.”

## ‘SONG SUNG BLUE’

**\_ out of 4 stars:** 1 ½  
**MPAA Rating:** PG-13  
**Running Time:** 133 minutes

Like Brewer’s previous “Dolemite Is My Name,” the new movie surrounds the main actors with a kindly support crew, like the guitar player played nicely by Michael Imperioli and managers portrayed by Fisher Stevens and Jim Belushi. Ella Anderson does excellent work as Claire’s angsty daughter, and look for a fun moment when an actor playing Pearl Jam’s Eddie Vedder takes the stage to share “Forever in Blue Jeans.”

The songs are excellently handled. Brewer is, after all, the director of “Hustle & Flow,” too. Hudson radiates as she sings, while Jackman absolutely nails Diamond’s sound and stance. If you came to hear “Sweet Caroline,” you’ll leave with a deeper respect for a songwriter who also wrote such gems as “Play Me” and “Holly Holy.”



Focus Features

This image released by Focus Features shows Hugh Jackman and Kate Hudson, right, in a scene from “Song Sung Blue.”

It’s just that the overly long song performances are always smiling, exuberant affairs in what has to be considered a story of tragedy and they don’t fit tonally. Of course, music was the Sardinas’ happy place — their onstage names were Lightning & Thunder — but the blissful deliveries seem more like cheesy holiday movie fodder than studs in a well-constructed movie.

Some unnecessary Hollywood touches — an overcooked scene with a defibrillator and the ridiculous, non-factual way we lose Mike — stick out poorly. The filmmakers also never really explore the world of musical impersonation during a time when authenticity was becoming the coin of the realm. It doesn’t know what to do about heroes who are deeply campy, using wind

machines in a biker bar. Overall, it’s just not so good, so good.

“Song Sung Blue,” a Focus Feature release that hits theaters on Christmas Day, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association for thematic material, some strong language, some sexual material and brief drug use. Running time: 133 minutes. One and a half stars out of four.

## SPONGEBOB

FROM PAGE D1

The Flying Dutchman. And SpongeBob, determined to not be just a bubble blowing baby boy, is set off on his own odyssey that takes him and his jolly starfish sidekick Patrick (Bill Fagerbakke) on a madcap adventure to the underworld with the ghost of The Flying Dutchman ( Mark Hamill) and his lackey Barb (Regina Hall). SpongeBob, as earnest as ever, believes he’s there to prove his swashbuckling mettle. The Flying Dutchman has other plans.

This underworld is a wild, colorful place (the words surreal tiki bar have been thrown around) where sirens lure you in with smooth jazz (far too tempting for Squidward, voiced again by Rodger Bumpass), where two monstrous creatures start spontaneously kissing one another instead of killing the intruders and where guardian skeletons can be brought down with laughter. Just wait until you see how SpongeBob and Patrick decide they’ve passed the “intestinal fortitude” test.

“Search for SquarePants” was directed by Derek Drymon and written by Pam Brady and Matt Lieberman. Drymon is an animation veteran, who worked with SpongeBob creator Stephen Hillenburg on the development of his signature series.

One significant change is that “Search for SquarePants” embraces 3D animation, which is a little jarring at first, especially coming after the short “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles” film, with its handdrawn style, that plays before “SpongeBob.” I’m not entirely sure what’s improved with the new look. Perhaps the more vulgar visual gags with butts and such look a little more innocent in 3D? Thankfully, the

irreverent sense of play remains firmly intact. During one particularly manic montage, we’re even transported into the studio boss’ office who tells them the movie has gone off the rails. There’s also some live action insanity in Santa Monica.

As far as lessons to be learned from this outing, “SpongeBob” stays admirably in zone of concerns of its target audience, like being too scared to ride the rollercoaster and not

wanting to admit it. One conflict involves external forces trying to convince SpongeBob that he’s outgrown his friend. There’s always room for big, worldly themes in animation, but it’s nice when they take on the micro issues that consume children’s worlds as well. Hillenburg died in 2018, but his wholly unique, zany world lives on, now four features in. It might not be the best of the bunch, but the infectious childlike spirit

(and intestinal fortitude) remains firmly intact.

“The SpongeBob Movie:

Search for SquarePants,” a Paramount Pictures release in theaters Friday, is rated PG by the Motion Picture Association

for “rude humor, action and some scary images.” Running time: 96 minutes. Two and a half stars out of four.

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