



Charlie Cox as Matt Murdock/Daredevil in Season 2 of "Daredevil: Born Again."

JOJO WHILDEN TNS

REVIEW

'Daredevil: Born Again' Season 2: Balancing the scales of justice

BY DOMINIC BAEZ
The Seattle Times

Last year's excellent "Daredevil: Born Again" took its time establishing the stakes. Through its slow-burn pacing, the first season of the Disney+ series served as a reintroduction to characters and storylines we hadn't seen since the Marvel Television series was on (and then canceled by) Netflix in the mid-2010s. It was, in a word, the setup. There's nothing slow about Season 2, though,

which begins to capitalize on that setup by diving in fists first. From its beat-'em-up opener to its chaotic finale, this new season amps up ... well, everything, to greatly entertaining effect.

Season 2, the first episode of which premieres Tuesday on Disney+, continues shortly after the events of the first season: New York City is in a state of emergency, thanks to Mayor Wilson Fisk / Kingpin (Vincent D'Onofrio) and his Safer Streets Initiative, which bans vigilantism. Enforcing his

edict is his own private, taxpayer-funded militia, the Anti-Vigilante Task Force, which has been given carte blanche to make the city "safer." If that means sadistically spitting in the face of constitutional liberties and protections to terrorize and disappear anyone who gets in their way - the immigrant restaurateur, the overworked defense lawyer, a fellow law enforcement officer - so be it. It's for the good of the city, obviously. (The parallels to the Trump administration and its use of Im-

migration and Customs Enforcement aren't exactly subtle.)

Meanwhile, Matt Murdock / Daredevil (Charlie Cox) and Karen Page (Deborah Ann Woll) are in hiding, trying to take down Wilson from the shadows. Karen is taking a cloak-and-dagger approach, finding and sharing evidence that Wilson is up to his old criminal ways, while Matt is rocking a new Daredevil suit (finally with the "DD" logo!) and generally being a thorn in the task force's side. Their goal: to create

a resistance movement against the mayor, and break his autocratic rule over the city by showing everyone just who he really is (which, you know, is a crime overlord).

Whereas the first season was defined by suffocating guilt born of loss and regret, the second season is more about penance, of seeking redemption and second chances. It leans into the philosophical - What is a vigilante? What is a hero? - and the religious. (Matt's Catholicism plays a much heavier role this season.) It asks questions that don't have easy answers: Who deserves forgiveness, and who can grant it? Who gets to make the call between life or death, and when does it cross the line from justice to vengeance? It also wonders - best shown in a clever sequence of interwoven flashbacks in a midseason episode - if people are capable of change, or if the past is the only thing that defines us.

But it's not all weighty discussions of morality and philosophy; the action packs just as much of a punch this season. It only takes a few minutes into the first episode before Daredevil is throwing bodies around in viscerally kinetic fisticuffs. The fight choreography remains stellar, particularly when two secondary characters - superhero Jessica Jones (Krysten Ritter, who reprises her role from the "Jessica Jones" series) and assassin Bullseye (a stand-out Wilson Bethel) - are teaming up or duking it out with Daredevil. A particular gem: a prison break-style sequence that's so well done it rivals the famed one-shot hallway fight scene from the first season of the original series. (This season also seems to remember that Matt has supernatural hearing, a skill he honed after becoming blind in

his youth and one that saves him more than once this time around.)

Speaking of standouts, Cox and D'Onofrio again nail their performances. D'Onofrio this season brings an enormous range of emotion to Wilson, who's generally known for stoicism or rage. Watching him watch his world fall apart is a pure delight. And Cox brings his trademark witty charm and rueful grin, adding depth and nuance to the superhero. (And kudos to Matthew Lillard's gleefully unhinged Mr. Charles, a mysterious CIA operative who seems to be playing a much bigger game than Wilson.)

What didn't stand out (or did, depending on how you look at it) is the lighting. Lens flares are everywhere, and more than a few scenes were so blindingly backlit that it was difficult to tell what was happening on screen. Thankfully that tended to happen during slower moments, so none of the action was missed, but it was distracting all the same.

Suffice to say, all that Season 1 setup has paid off quite nicely in Season 2. Across eight tightly paced episodes full of narrative momentum, we watch as Matt and his friends try to balance the scales of justice, no matter how futile it may seem. (It's apt that Matt finds himself praying to St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes and desperate situations.) It's classic David versus Goliath, and there's something powerful in Matt's act of resistance, of saying no when everyone else says yes, of standing up to injustice even when it's unpopular - maybe especially then. It's an important message, one we should remember, even if the deliverer is wearing a devil suit.



Abel Martinez and Mailon Durineck in a scene from "Agridulce."

BENJAMIN DE MENIL/PROVIDED PHOTO TNS

REVIEW

In the coming-of-age documentary 'Agridulce,' the kids are keeping bachata alive

BY FIDEL MARTINEZ
Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES

Before becoming a global phenomenon in the 2000s thanks to artists like Aventura, Monchy y Alexandra and Prince Royce, and before being declared an "intangible cultural heritage of humanity" by UNESCO in 2019, bachata was - and continues to be - the soundtrack of the Dominican Republic.

The importance of the genre to the people of the

Caribbean nation is at the heart of "Agridulce," a music documentary that had its world premiere at this year's South by Southwest Film Festival in Austin, Texas. Filmed over the course of five years, the feature follows four young students at Academia de Bachata, a music conservatory in the beachside resort town of Cabarete. It's the only school of its kind in the world.

Academia de Bachata was founded in 2013 by music producer Benjamin De Menil. After traveling to the Dominican Republic

to record for nearly three decades, De Menil says he wanted to create something that would ensure that the next generation continues the traditions of bachata.

"One of the things I loved about the bachata musicians I was working with early on is that they were such natural musicians. There was never any sheet music, so whenever we were going to record I would say, 'Let's do this song and it goes like this,' and they would listen to it for a little bit before they figured it out

and they were playing it," he said. "I thought that we could somehow harness that energy in a more organized and educational format and make a school where we're helping young children become professional musicians within this genre that has a lot of opportunity."

De Menil partnered with DREAM Project, a nonprofit organization that did work in Cabarete, and launched Academia de Bachata in 2013. Since then, the school has provided hundreds of children with a free musical

education.

"There were a lot of things we were trying to figure out along the way about what the best way to teach this music was because this wasn't your typical conservatory. We were focusing on the traditions passed on rather than some style of music that there are already textbooks for."

To make "Agridulce," De Menil, who produced the film, reached out to Frank Pavich, director of the 2013 "Jodorowsky's Dune," the cult classic documentary about avant-garde filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky's quixotic and failed attempt to adapt Frank Herbert's 1965 sci-fi novel "Dune." It didn't take much to bring him on board.

"Ben contacted me and told me about the project. I responded with what's Bachata?" the Croatian American director said. "I had never even heard of the musical genre. And then he sent me some music. He sent me footage that he had shot of [Cabarete] and of the school. And it was unlike anything I'd ever seen. It was so colorful and so incredible that I just wanted to jump on right away. I was like, 'Great, when can we go down there and start shooting? It was really that fast.'"

Pavich says now he hears bachata everywhere.

"I live between Switzerland and Croatia and now that I know how to pick it up, I hear it in cars passing by a cafe in Geneva and in Croatia," he said. "It's everywhere, it's infiltrated everything in the best way possible."

"Agridulce" is an ethnomusicological documentary - it captures the music of a specific place and people and shows how the tradition is kept alive - that also doubles as a

coming-of-age story. The film follows students of varying ages - Edickson, Frandy, Orianny and Yerian - out of the classroom, showing us moments of intimacy with their families and friends while also giving us a slice of quotidian life in Cabarete.

As such, "Agridulce" doesn't shy away from the political tensions of the beachside resort. Much like in the U.S., immigration is a contentious topic in the Dominican Republic - the country shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti, which has seen an exodus of its people over the decade.

De Menil and Pavich said that nearly a third of Academia de Bachata's student body is of Haitian descent, and that they would have had to go out of their way to not include one of them in the film.

This tension plays out in the storyline of Frendy, a magnetic student of Haitian descent who uses bachata to fit in.

"Many young people are in that position of being made to feel they don't belong at that time in life when a person most wants to find their place," De Menil said. "We see that music can help kids, particularly immigrant kids, find belonging."

"The film ultimately speaks to the way that culture and shared history contribute to the development of authentic, lived creativity," said South by Southwest consulting programmer Jim Kolmar. "It's something innate and inevitable, and 'Agridulce' really explores that beautifully. Obviously it's full of incredible music, but the deeper cultural context is essential, and seeing it through the perspective of the students at Academia de Bachata helps us connect the dots."