



Howard Hughes (Jason Robards), or a man who professes to be him, has been injured in a motorcycle accident in "Melvyn and Howard."

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the movies  
**Louise Snider**

**Delightful cast brings off tale of mystery man**

If "good-natured" can be applied to a movie, then "Melvin and Howard" (R) warrants that description. It's an easy-going, humorous, apple-pie kind of movie.

Johnathan Demme, who showed he has a real feel for grass roots Americana when he directed "Citizen's Band," does it again in "Melvin and Howard," with a cast that could charm the tattoos off a sailor.

Paul Le Mat is Melvin Dummar, the inheritor, almost, of the great American dream. Dummar is the gas station attendant who was left \$156 million by Howard Hughes in what became known as the Mormon will. The will wasn't accepted in court, but that really isn't essential to the story.

We get a good idea of what Melvin would do with any windfall from an incident midway through the movie. Lynda, his wife (a very colorful and confident acting job by Mary Steenburgen), wins \$10,000 cash plus prizes on a television quiz show.

LYNDA AND Melvin use the money for a down payment on a new house. But while Lynda struggles with the budget, working things out to the penny, who pulls up in a new Cadillac with a speedboat in tow? Melvin.

You know he is not going to have them for long. Melvin is always in a race with his creditors. The sight of the repossessors at work is not a novelty in this household.

Melvin operates on the wrong side of prudence, yet we get the feeling that maybe he makes the world a better place. His wishing and dreaming and optimism go along with a generous and caring nature.

If it weren't for these qualities, he probably never would have struck up an acquaintance with Hughes.

Melvin is driving across the desert one night when he stops and gives a lift to a disheveled, old man he finds injured beside the road. The man says he is Howard Hughes. Melvin's response is: Call yourself whatever you want.

AND MELVIN, an aspiring songwriter, teaches Hughes the lyrics to his latest endeavor, "Santa's Souped-up Steigh." He drops the old man off in Vegas after giving him his last dollar, and that's the end of that until the millionaire's death and the discovery of the will.

Jason Robards, foregoing some of his usual overacting, is a delight as the eccentric Hughes. He is only on the screen for 10 or 15 minutes, but what minutes they are. He is testy, bemused, assertive, peculiar, absolutely perfect as Hughes.

Melvin keeps on the move, from one city to another, one job to another, one marriage to another. He is running a gas station in Utah when a mysterious stranger leaves an envelope with him and drives away. The public part of Melvin's life begins.

It involves celebrity treatment, media exposure and then derision when the will is not accepted as genuine.

Somewhat, Melvin seems to handle the circumstances and disappointment. In the movie, he says he never really thought that he would get the \$156 million. The important thing was that "Howard Hughes sang my song."

For a man who doesn't handle money well, Melvin knows a lot about values.

Lynda Dummar (Mary Steenburgen), Melvyn's wife, appears on a TV game show, "Easy Street" and wins \$10,000.

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