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Musical biographies are often enjoyable, but there’s something special about the ones in which movie stars go the extra mile and recreate the vocals of famous singers.Sissy Spacek’s beloved imitation of Loretta Lynn in “Coal Miner’s Daughter” stands out, and so does Gary Busey’s uncanny impersonation of Buddy Holly in “The Buddy Holly Story.” To that short list, we can now add Joaquin Phoenix as Johnny Cash and Reese Witherspoon as June Carter in “Walk the Line.”In each case, the vocals become an essential part of a characterization, making even the non-singing scenes seem part of a pattern. Music flows through these personalities, sometimes making it difficult to tell the difference between an on-stage performance and off-stage behavior. And that’s as it should be.This emphasis is especially important in “Walk the Line,” which presents Cash and Carter as two lost souls, burdened by childhood traumas, who spend most of the movie ridding themselves of their problems (including their ill-considered marriages to others) and finding themselves in their music.She’s been raised as a clown and a cut-up, convinced that she can’t sing. He’s been blamed by his father for his saintly brother’s early death. Dad even tells Cash that the wrong son died, and he carries this resentment with him like a torch.When Carter is a child star in the mid-1940s, Cash falls for her while listening to the radio. When he becomes a recording star in the mid-1950s, he encourages her to be a singer. When he turns to drugs in the 1960s, she’s there to tell him off and help him kick the habit. Inevitably, they spend the last 35 years of their lives as a devoted married couple.Directed and co-written by James Mangold, who guided Angelina Jolie to an Oscar in “Girl, Interrupted,” the movie takes more than two hours to demonstrate that these two people belong together. It’s a tribute to Mangold and his actors that we never doubt it. It’s a great love story.It’s also a remarkable vehicle for Witherspoon, who brings out June’s twangy, improvisatory comic genius as well as her level-headedness, and Phoenix, who has never held the screen before the way he does here. At times he seems possessed by the spirit of Cash, who died just two years ago (a few months after June died). There are moments, when the camera catches him from a certain angle, or his voice develops a deep, raspy, demonic Cash-ness, when you’d swear that Cash and Phoenix had merged into the same person.Although the other actors don’t get much screen time (Tyler Hilton gives a throwaway performance as Elvis Presley), two supporting players make an impression: Dallas Roberts as Sam Phillips, who gives Cash his big break by lecturing him, and Ginnifer Goodwin as Cash’s first wife, Vivian, who tries to make him conform to her ideas of a “regular” marriage. Also quite effective are Robert Patrick as Cash’s unforgiving father and Lucas Till as the son he wishes had survived. It was a good thing that I arrived early for my day at Microsoft (“Can Microsoft Finally Kill All The Bugs?” Page 82), since I spent my first 20 minutes getting lost among its endless array of look-alike office complexes. At first, I was struck by the campus’s apparent intimacy, with its low-rise buildings tucked among groves of towering Douglas firs. But after cruising through a Byzantine labyrinth of parking lots and side streets, I realized that I was at the epicenter of a place that was far larger than I had ever imagined. That’s the way it is with the world’s largest software company: Its gigantism sneaks up on you.Apparently, I’m not alone in that regard. Microsoft might be a $28 billion colossus, but some of its employees prefer to think of it as something akin to a startup. Consider the reaction that Scott Charney, Microsoft’s recently minted chief security officer and the former computer-crime boss at the Department of Justice, encountered when he first arrived at Redmond, Washington. A Microsoft insider reports that many employees were incensed by Charney’s appointment, arguing that he would burden them with bureaucracy. Charney was dumbfounded that a global organization of 50,000 people couldn’t bring itself to acknowledge that it’s a big — make that very big — company. Charney’s rejoinder to his critics: Microsoft is already a bureaucracy, and the fact that it doesn’t want to acknowledge that reality shows that it’s a very bad bureaucracy.The upshot of the Charney story: Microsoft has grown to dominate high tech, but in terms of its culture, the Redmond giant is still working through its adolescence. Bill BreenThe Loneliness of a Long-distance Campaign ManagerJoe Trippi, Howard Dean’s campaign manager, readily confesses that his dream was not to be involved in politics at all this year (“Joe Trippi’s Killer App,” page 109). After stewarding a brutal congressional race in Pennsylvania in 2002, he had a simple plan for 2003: “A year of beaches, beautiful women, and pi – a coladas.”So when his partners at his media consulting firm asked him to sit in on a meeting to discuss Dean’s race, he couldn’t have been less interested. Still, he came and was dismayed to discover himself responding to Dean’s message. “As I’m watching him, I’m thinking, ‘This guy really gets it.’ ” Then his left brain kicked in with a plea: “Are you out of your friggin’ mind? They’ll be carrying you away in a casket by June 30!”Passion trumped reason, and Trippi signed on. But the flesh is weaker than the heart, and by the end of an exhausting second quarter of manic fund-raising, Trippi’s body sent him a message. Standing at the counter of a café, he actually fell asleep on his feet, hit the ground, and cracked a rib. Still, he’s determined to soldier on. “This is the guy I’ve lusted for in my heart since I was 17. That’s the only reason I’m here.” Then he looks longingly at the framed photo of his placid farm in Maryland and reaches for a ringing telephone. Linda TischlerShip of FoolsI should explain why Deb Meyerson, Steve Zuckerman, and their three children were vainly trying to anchor late one night off the Aegean coast (“These People Spent a Year on a Boat and Lived to Tell the Story,” page 121). It wasn’t their fault. It was Fast Company‘s.Photographer Grant Delin and I, with my son Conor, met their boat, the Nowornot, a bit more than a week before the end of its voyage. Almost immediately, we sensed that we were upsetting a finely honed family rhythm. Grant was soon seasick, and I fell asleep mid-interview. Later that afternoon, we took Zuckerman and the kids ashore to photograph baseball practice near the beach. By the time we returned to the boat, night was starting to fall — and Meyerson was growing impatient.Rest assured, we did atone for our disruption, more or less. After dropping a line into the water at an inopportune moment, Grant galantly jumped into the dinghy to help Adam Zuckerman secure the Nowornot to the rocks onshore. The anchorage ultimately failed, but we still enjoyed a pretty stunning night under the Turkish sky. Keith H. Hammonds Large commercial banks are not very well known for their solicitude toward smaller companies. As we have noted in this column before, most major lending institutions are more eager to service the megaborrowing needs of big corporations and foreign governments than they are to take care of the working-capital needs of the small businesses in their own backyards. But over the past few months, one commercial institution, Wells Fargo Bank, headquartered in San Francisco, has begun taking the interests of smaller companies more to heart. The nation's 11th largest bank has recently introduced a new, unsecured line of credit available to solid businesses with sales from $200,000 to $3 million. In effect, this puts them on equal footing with the best of the bank's big customers.Before the new credit-line program was unveiled last September, Wells Fargo, like most commercial banks, required many of its smaller, unsecured customers to obtain approvals from their lending officers each time they needed to borrow money. Not surprisingly, many small business owners found this to be a major source of migraines. Some complained about the inconvenience of having to review detailed bank documents every few months. Others sounded off about the frustrations of tracking down their loan officers when they needed approval for small loans. For still others, the approval process was destructively slow. There were the times, for example, when they missed important discount opportunities offered by suppliers. Wells Fargo heard many of these woes when it organized focus groups attended by customers in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Says Terri Dial, vice-president and manager of business-product development, "We began thinking of ways to improve our service."Wells Fargo studied the complaints and, behold, it began to see opportunities for trimming its own costs of making a loan. Assembling pages and pages of loan documents to spell out all the conditions of a loan is labor-intensive and extremely costly, explains Dial. The expenses mount when the process has to be repeated more than once a year. So Wells Fargo began rethinking its bureaucratic ways in hopes of finding a more cost-effective method of lending to smaller businesses. Indeed, many of the things borrowers were looking for were well aligned with the bank's own eagerness to slash costs.Before granting an unsecured line of credit, Wells Fargo conducts a thorough financial analysis of the company's credit, just as it does for any loan. Among other things, the bank likes to see several years of operating profits, a stable management team, and no more than moderate leverage. If a business passes the test, it is offered a credit line from $10,000 to $250,000, depending on its circumstances. In fact, the bank has set up a special toll-free number that customers can use to request credit advances to their checking accounts. Unlike most other types of working capital loans, moreover, the only payment that is mandatory at the end of each month is interest -- and only on the portion of the line that has been used.By automating many of its monthly monitoring procedures, Dial says that Wells Fargo has been able to offer its better small business customers interest rates that are one-half to one percentage point less than they might otherwise receive from the bank. As for the basic role of the lending officer, that shouldn't change very much, she says. "Instead of spending a lot of time on minutia and filling out forms, we're hoping this will enable bankers to understand their customers better. Banking is very much a relationship business. We want our lending officers to become more valuable as contacts."How does a penny-pinching public company raise a new dose of equity without paying all those fees to underwriters and attorneys? Calumet Industries Inc., a $55-million maker of specialty lubricating oils, tackled this question last winter and thinks it has found an intriguing method.Calumet, located in Chicago, went public in 1962. As the business expanded over the years, it managed to finance its ongoing growth with earnings and bank debt. When industrial demand for its products began stretching capacity in 1981, management elected to go deep into debt to finance a major new refinery in Louisiana. Their notion was to go ahead and build the $18-million facility, then seek more permanent financing later on.The timing was dreadful. Demand for Calumet's oil-based products softened in the wake of the 1982-83 recession and the worldwide oil glut. Interest expenses on its bank loans soared, and its earnings shriveled from $1.45 per share in 1981 to just 26? in 1982. Given the grim state of affairs and the general weakness of the capital markets, there were not a lot of attractive options for refinancing, notes president and chief executive officer S. Mark Salvino. So Calumet proceeded to pull in its horns. As part of a strategy for saving cash, it halted quarterly dividend payments to shareholders.But toward the end of 1983, the crunch began to ease. Demand for Calumet's products was looking up, and the company set out to find a way to reduce its leverage. As it stood, the balance sheet was weighted with debt, by a ratio of three to two. That made the bankers nervous. "We were hoping to get out capitalization back in order," Salvino explains -- to a debt/equity ratio of more like two to three.Salvino, a former president of a natural-gas holding company, investigated the possibility of doing a $2-million or $3-million equity offering, but to him the costs of a small public offering seemed staggering; together, the underwriters and attorneys would claim about 8? for every new dollar raised (about $160,000 on $2 million). On the other hand, there was no getting around the fact that Calumet needed to attract money. So Salvino began searching for alternatives.Early in 1984, Salvino conjured up an idea for, in effect, killing two birds with one stone. He suggested that Calumet raise the new equity capital directly from its existing shareholders. The investors had been without dividends since the end of 1981. Why couldn't the company design an attractive offer just for them -- something to reward the shareholders for standing by Calumet during tough times but, at the same time, encourage them to buy new shares?Salvino asked the company's law firm to explore the technicalities of declaring a special type of dividend -- one consisting not of cash but of a warrant to purchase new stock at a favorable price. Much to Salvino's surprise, the attorneys were unable to locate any company that had successfully raised capital in this way. At the same time, although unconventional, the technique seemed perfectly legal as far as Securities and Exchange Commission regulations were concerned. If it worked, it would be tens of thousands of dollars cheaper than selling a secondary stock offering through an investment bank.Last spring, Calument decided to give it a try. The company prepared an eight-page prospectus and mailed it to shareholders. For every five shares owned, a shareholder received a warrant to buy one share at the discounted price.Shareholders have until May 1, 1985, to purchase a total of 332,693 new shares. When and if all of the warrants are converted, Calumet stands to raise a bit more than $2 million, even after printing and legal expenses of about $35,000.Last December, with the stock trading at $7.75 per share on the over-the-counter market, Calumet's financing strategy seemed to be on track. Its architect, Salvino, was pleased. "We kind of backed into this," he shrugs. "Our motivation was to raise equity capital at the lowest available cost. And we wanted to give our shareholders something. . . . We just couldn't give them cash."

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