

Movie Review: 'Straight Outta Compton'

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NEW YORK - The proper limits of free speech and the appropriate use of violence are just two of the topics raised in the striking but gritty dramatization "Straight Outta Compton" (Universal).

As he recounts the rise and collapse of the gangster rap group N.W.A, beginning in 1986, director F. Gary Gray clearly intends to use the ensemble's experiences as a vantage point for a larger critique of society as a whole.

While there's no denying the serious intent behind Gray's collective biography, the yawning gulf between the materialistic lifestyle the whole genre of hip-hop tends to glamorize and an outlook based on scriptural values is equally indisputable. Jonathan Herman and Andrea Berloff's script nibbles at the edges of the art form's assumptions, but never fundamentally challenges them.

The story focuses primarily on the two members of N.W.A — Ice Cube (played by the rapper's son, O'Shea Jackson Jr) and Dr. Dre (Corey Hawkins) — who went on to have headlining solo careers as well as on Eazy-E (Jason Mitchell), another founder whose life took a different turn. This trio's goal, shared with collaborators DJ Yella (Neil Brown Jr.) and MC Ren (Aldis Hodge), is to translate the frustrations of growing up in the Los Angeles-area ghetto of the title into popular protest music.

Aided by seemingly good-hearted manager Jerry Heller (Paul Giamatti), who successfully markets their sound, the guys parlay their local notoriety into nationwide fame. But controversy dogs them, based largely on the perception that some of their lyrics call for attacks on the police.

The nature and legitimacy of N.W.A's actual stance is open to debate. But there's no getting around the fact that cops — whether they hail from Southern California or the Midwest — are relentlessly demonized in "Straight Outta Compton."

In the current climate of alienation between minority communities and law enforcement, such vilification becomes more than mere evidence of a narrow cinematic perspective. Reinforced by images of the Rodney King beating — and news accounts of the acquittals that followed for the officers involved in it — this unbalanced portrayal skirts the border between radicalism and irresponsibility.

The movie's outlook on violence in general, at least of the retaliatory sort, is ambiguous at best. Giamatti earnestly counsels Eazy-E to seek only legal means of redress after the singer is assaulted by menacing, semi-psychotic record producer

Suge Knight (R. Marcus Taylor) -- who in summer 2015 awaits trial on murder charges stemming from an incident that, ironically, took place on the "Compton" film set.

Yet Heller, the only white character of any significance in "Compton," turns out, in the end, to be more of a greedy manipulator than a genuine mentor. And an earlier scene has made giddy fun out of an armed confrontation between the freewheeling womanizers of N.W.A and some rivals for the affections of the ladies they're currently, er, entertaining in a hotel suite.

In fact, these competitors interrupt an orgy. Not only is this interlude needlessly explicit, it also serves to reinforce the picture's overall misogyny, under the terms of which women's body parts are far more prominent than their personalities.

A more critical treatment of the ethically impoverished worldview that permeates the music it celebrates would have made this sometimes flavorful slice of pop culture history endorsable for at least a few mature viewers. And including a line or two of dialogue not weighed down with an obscenity would have helped as well.

The film contains flawed morality, some harsh violence, strong sexual content, including brief but graphic casual activity and full nudity, drug use, several instances of profanity and pervasive rough and crude language. The Catholic News Service classification is O — morally offensive. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted. Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian.

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