

Despite star power, 'Be Cool' falters

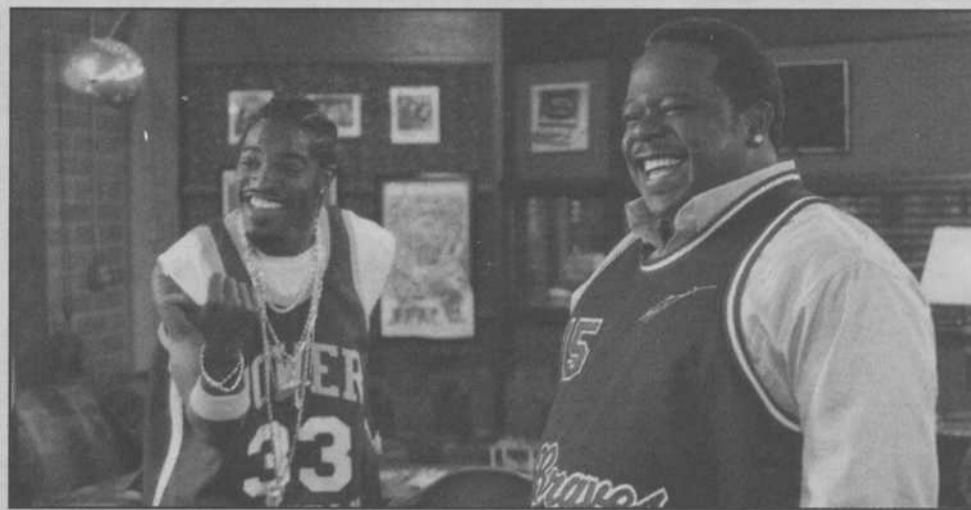
By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

Ten years after starring in the crime caper "Get Shorty," John Travolta is belatedly reprising his colorful role as mobster Chili Palmer in "Be Cool," another adaptation of an Elmore Leonard best-selling novel. Also back for a second round of madcap hijinks are Harvey Keitel and Danny DeVito, though the latter appears briefly in one of those "blink and you missed it" performances.

Unfortunately, this sorry excuse for a sequel is marred by an insulting storyline, a distracting number of cameos, constant commercials, free-flowing profanity, gratuitous violence, endless ethnic slurs, sexual preference insults, and unchallenged misogyny.

Because the events have veered considerably from that of the book, the blame for this fiasco must be shared by both the film's scriptwriter, Peter Steinfeld, and its director, Felix Gary Gray.

An examination of Steinfeld's bio reveals that his only other screenwriting credits include the abysmal "Drowning Mona" and the equally-awful "Analyze That," the disappointing sequel to "Analyze This." Gray, on the other hand, was an acclaimed hip-hop video director for artists like Coolio, Dr. Dre and Ice Cube before making the jump to full-



Rapper Andre 3000, left, one half of the Grammy Award-winning Atlanta duo Outkast, shares the bill with comedian/actor Cedric "The Entertainer" in the comedy "Be Cool."

length features with the irreverent urban comedy, "Friday."

"Be Cool" reflects the cultural values of gangsta rap, beginning with all the bling-bling and its offensive celebration of consumerism and materialism. Among its incessant advertisements, were prominent product placements for Domino's Pizza, Pepsi, Mountain Dew, Fila, Dairy Queen, Toyota, Ford, Staples, MTV, 'Billboard Magazine, Budweiser, Porsche, Stolichnaya Vodka, and Snap-On Tools, to name a few. Why should any audience have to pay to watch two hours of commercials?

When not crassly selling these items, the movie devoted considerable screen time to cross-promoting people just as obviously. While the picture appears to

be designed as a carefully-crafted platform to launch the career of emerging diva Christina Milian, it also spreads some love for Steven Tyler and Aerosmith, The Black Eyed Peas, Kobe Bryant and the L.A. Lakers, Gene Simmons of Kiss, Wyclef Jean, Fred Durst, Anna Nicole Smith and lots of other celebrities.

Yes, "Be Cool" does have the rudiments of a plot, too, though the viewing experience is basically the cinematic equivalent of watching a loop of the same three-minute rap video over, and over, and over, ad infinitum, ad nauseam.

In 25 words or less, the story unfolds as follows, Chili and his moll, Edie (Uma Thurman), decide to rescue attractive Linda (Milian) from a life of exploitation by

Russian and ghetto mobsters in a strip club in order to turn the promising talent into the next singing sensation. But blocking Chili's path are an assortment of oddballs, from a bourgy, Wharton-educated hip-hop producer with a menacing posse (Cedric the Entertainer) to a beefy, homosexual Samoan bodyguard (The Rock) to an ever-posing, wigger wannabe (Vince Vaughn).

Spare me. I'd rather spend two hours having bone marrow extracted.

Poor (0 stars). Rating: PG-13 for sex, slurs, expletives, drug use, violence.

Bail reduced for Charles' criminal

LOS ANGELES (AP) - Bail was reduced for a long-time sound engineer of the late Ray Charles who was arrested two weeks ago on allegations of stealing the singer's master recordings.

At a hearing Tuesday, Superior Court Commissioner Dennis Mulcahy said Terry Howard had no prior record and reduced bail from \$1 million to \$100,000. Howard is charged with two counts of grand theft by embezzlement from Ray Charles Enterprises and one count of receiving stolen property.

Howard, arrested at his home Feb. 17, was scheduled to appear in court for a preliminary hearing on March 28.

An executive with Ray Charles Enterprises called police after visiting Howard at his home last month and seeing boxes of Charles' recordings, including master recordings, according to KCBS-TV, citing police.

"We did a search warrant on his home and we recovered several hundred items that had been identified as belonging to Ray Charles Enterprises," Detective Donald Hrycyk told the news station.

Defense lawyer Steven Cron said he was convinced of Howard's innocence.

"Ray Charles counted on him for many, many years," Cron said. "People just love this guy and respect him."

Jerry Digney, a publicist for Charles, said in a statement: "Whatever the outcome, Ray Charles Enterprises puts a high value on its assets, especially its master tapes and will do its utmost to insure their safety and proper handling along with protecting other irreplaceable valuables belonging to the late entertainer and to his estate."

Charles died June 10 at his Beverly Hills home of acute liver disease. He was 73 years old.



Soldiers circle the "Gunner's Palace" in Iraq. The palace formerly belonged to Uday Hussein, son of deposed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. After U.S. forces captured Baghdad, American troops moved into the trashed mansion.

Film shows Iraq war as seen by soldiers stationed in Baghdad

By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

Filmmaker Michael Tucker spent two months towards the end of 2003 embedded with the American GIs stationed at Uday Hussein's bombed-out, palatial estate. Nicknamed "Gunner Palace," the gaudy crib had originally been outfitted by the playboy with a swimming pool, a putting green, a circular staircase and other decadent touches.

However, over the course of this eye-opening documentary, the camera focuses on a motley mix of young Americans desperately trying to make themselves comfortable in a trashed mansion plagued by plumbing problems, mortar attacks and a lack of privacy. Worse, they have a dangerous day job patrolling a city where snipers, RPGs and roadside bombs sit in wait with regularity.

What makes this movie

most interesting is that a half-dozen soldiers featured in the film never made it back. And despite the unit's ethnic diversity, this diverse cross-section of Generation Kill were rather tight-knit and gung-ho to follow orders. Fascinating viewing, even if you don't share their patriotic fervor that what's great for America is great for Iraq.

Excellent (3.5 stars). Rated R for profanity, and mature themes.



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