

Deft acting helps pimp-turned-rapper movie sing

By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

DJay (Terrence Howard) is a small-time hustler caught in the throes of a mid-life crisis. His years in the pimping and pot games have left him with gold teeth and a doo-rag but otherwise not any better off than where he was when he started. With his perverted version of the American Dream yet to be realized, he cruises the ghetto in a beat up jalopy that has no air conditioning.

Worse, he is struggling to keep a roof over the heads of the three ho's with whom he shares his cramped quarters, a rundown shack on the seamy side of Memphis. From the start, it is easy to see that these prostitutes have turned into more trouble than they're worth.

Shug (Taraji Henson) can't work presently because she was impregnated by one of her customers and is now close to giving birth. Lexus (Paula Jai Parker), who already has a baby to take care of, doesn't respect DJay very much.

Since she sees him as useless, she feels free to give him a lot of lip, condescendingly referring to him as her chauffeur.

And Nola (Taryn Manning), a White girl without rhythm, is unable to offer her wares to the relatively upscale, strip club clientele because of her career-crippling



Real-life rap artist Ludacris plays Memphis rapper Skinny Black in "Hustle & Flow."

lack of coordination.

Instead, she's been reduced to the meager lot of your typical, two-bit street-walker.

So, where has this untenable predicament left DJay? Dusting off another dream, namely, his childhood desire to be a hip-hop star.

Fortunately, he is quite the wordsmith, at least when it comes to translating his own life experiences to rhyme. He quickly comes up with a

catchy little ditty he calls, "Beat That Bitch," a White slavery anthem with staccato lines like, "Whip that bitch! Hit that bitch!"

Obviously, DJay has the right stuff to make it in the misogynistic world of gangsta' rap, though the question remains whether he will ever get that big break which every undiscovered, unconnected artist so desperately needs.

Thus unfolds "Hustle &

Flow," written and directed by Memphis native Craig Brewer, and produced by Oscar-nominee John Singleton (for *Boyz n the Hood*).

This fractured fairy tale

made quite a splash at the Sundance Film Festival earlier this year, where it won the Audience Award, for its raw-edged depiction of one man's shot at redemption. The movie co-stars comedian Anthony Anderson, who is remarkably effective in a rare dramatic role as Key, a childhood friend who, as luck would have it, just happens to be a recording engineer.

Despite the understandable objections of his uptight, bourgeois wife, Yvette (Elise Neal), who hates the idea of her husband hanging out with a pimp, Key decides to help out anyway. In turn, he enlists the assistance of Shelby (DJ Qualls), a church organist blessed with a beat machine and armed with hip-hop aspirations.

Once the tracks are laid down in a makeshift studio, the tension mounts as everyone awaits the impending arrival of native son Skinny Black (Ludacris), a rap industry icon slated to return to his roots at a club owned by Arnel (Isaac Hayes).

Will Skinny grant DJay an audience and listen to the recently completed demo tape,

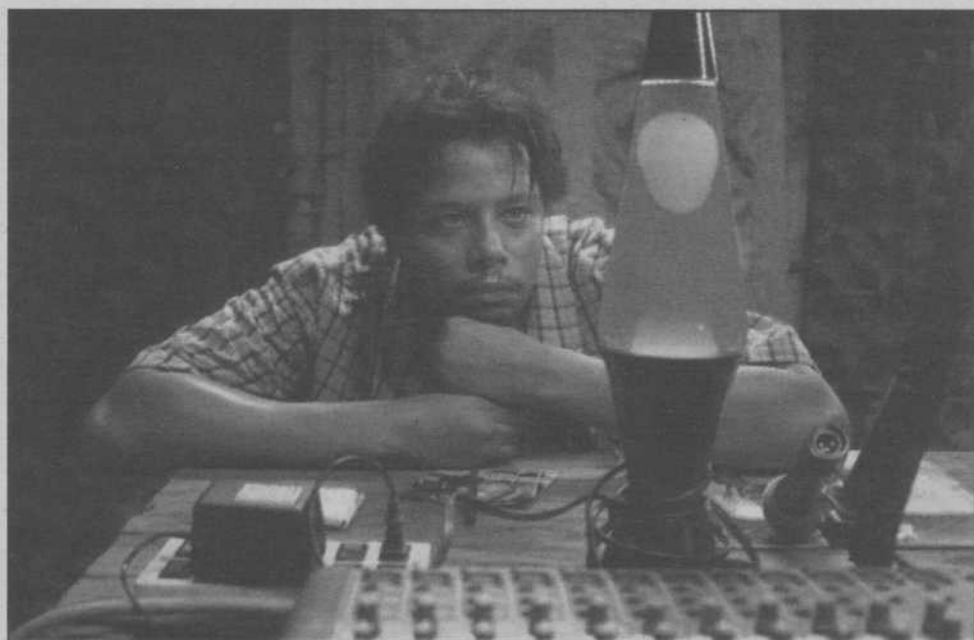
or will he have forgotten his roots and turn his back on the brother eager for an avenue out of the slums? To its credit, "Hustle & Flow" is very well done for a flick obviously produced on a modest budget.

The dialogue, laced with expletives and ethnic slurs, is plausible enough. The storyline is engrossing from start to finish. And the acting is first-rate, especially that of Terrence Howard who manages to humanize and make us pull for a most monstrous character.

This is a movie certain to generate some healthy debate as to whether it is glorifying or condemning the thug life which is so celebrated by the hip-hop generation.

Some will also ask whether so much vile material needed to be included to make its salient point that underneath the slick, sleazy, exploitative exterior, pimps are people, too.

Excellent (4 stars). Rated R for graphic violence, female frontal nudity, gratuitous sexuality, drug use, ethnic slurs and pervasive profanity.



Terrence Howard plays DJay, a Memphis pimp with designs on being a big-time rapper.

Interview

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talented director and an incredibly gifted human being. I feel that he's changing my perspective with regards to acting. He's making me a better actor. But George Wolfe [director of "Lackawanna Blues"] and Craig did the same thing, too."

KW: Have you considered directing?

TH: "It's interesting that you should say that, because Jim Sheridan recently suggested it. And he said that he would executive pro-


duce my the first film that I choose to direct. Sorry, I have to do another interview now."

KW: No problem, thanks for the time, Terrence.

TH: "Thank you for appreciating my great grandmother."

KW: Like I said, her spirit movies me to this day.


TH: "I'll talk to you again soon, man. Be good."



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