

Mac delivers funny in final film

By Dwight Brown
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"Always make them remember you," says Bernie Mac during Soul Men's final credits. He's prophetic. We will.

Give the brothers some! Back in the day, in the '70s when they sang back-up for their trio's leader Marcus Hooks (John Legend), Floyd (Bernie Mac) and Louis (Sam Jackson) were as cool as black ice. Their soul group had the hits, the smooth moves and enough charisma to drive the ladies wild. Their downfall came when egocentric Marcus pulled a Diana Ross and opted for a solo career. Call it creative differences, call it a clash of egos, but Floyd and Louise went their separate ways.

Years later, karma catches up with the flashy lead singer and he dies suddenly. There will be a tribute show at the Apollo in his honor, and Floyd, who is living with his adult children in a gated California community, seeks out Louis, who resides in a SRO hotel and is living on dog food. To entice the contrary, argumentative Louis to perform with him at the Apollo ceremony, Floyd tells his old mate they'll get paid \$40,000 for their performance. Louise drops his opposition and jumps in the passenger seat of Floyd's emerald-green Cadillac convertible. The boys leave L.A. and are off to New York.

With all your heart you hope Bernie Mac's final film will be a joy ride, a fitting conclusion to the comedian's painfully short life. Hoping may not be enough. Powerful and cohesive films are often adaptations of novels, plays or true events where a strong storyline provides an anchor. Some of the weakest films are simplistic stories built around actors in hopes of striking box office pay dirt. Mac and Jackson had known each other for years and always yearned to be in a film together.

Producers David T. Friendly ("Little Miss Sunshine"), Charles Castaldi ("Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins") and Bernie's manager Steve Greener ("The Bernie Mac Show") decided to help the guys fulfill their dream. They hired screenwriters Robert Ramsey and Matthew Stone, who wrote Life for Eddie Murphy and Martin Lawrence, to write a screenplay. Unfortunately, their story's premise has far



The late Bernie Mac, right, and Samuel L. Jackson star in the hilarious film "Soul Men."

more potential than their flimsy script.

The basic storyline about two cantankerous, old soul singers on a road trip is novel, in a "Sunshine Boys," "Odd Couple" kind of way. The script gives Mac and Jackson rich, fiery characters they can build on, and ultimately they manage to create solid, impressive performances. Their efforts are encumbered by an iffy plotline with silly plot twists and ineffective detours; revelations regarding a long lost daughter, played by Sharon Leal ("Dreamgirls"), are unnecessary diversions.

Director Malcolm Lee has built a solid reputation making African Heritage comedies: "The Best Man" (Taye Diggs), "Undercover Brother" (Eddie Griffin and Dave Chappelle), "Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins" (Martin Lawrence). He's comfortable with the genre and with helping Black comedians find their groove on screen. Yet he seems to be ill at ease with this endeavor. The film lacks precision comic timing. Scenes drag and go on long after the point of the scene has been made. A good portion of the film takes place on the road; an astute director would magically, methodically edit in real, exterior car shots with the staged shots of the guys talking in a car with obvious, fake computer-generated scenery in the background. Lee doesn't figure out how to make these scenes work. Quick edits were needed, instead, too many of these sequences will test your patience.

Within the confines of a ho-hum script and imperfect direction, Mac and Jackson exploit every inch of their lovable, eccentric characters. Jackson, who's given a lot of one-dimensional performances lately ("Black Snake Moan"), is on his game: grumpy, funny, outraged, ballistic and finally resigned. Mac is in rare form too; he exudes a humor and charm that makes you wish the grim reaper had spared him for a couple more decades. His eyes bug out his head, he's emphatic, crazed, funny and ultimately endearing. He and Jackson are as in-synch as Abbott and Costello or Laurel and Hardy. At one point, they are stuck at the side of the road with a flat tire and Jackson is griping about fixing it. The radio blares, a song comes over the air, "I'm Your Puppet." It's a song the boys recorded. They get their positions, start gliding across the pavement, swiveling their hips and singing in harmony like the good old days. Moments like these are precious.

Sean Hayes, from TV's "Will & Grace," plays the group's agent's son, the man who tries to get them back together. He's delightfully flippant and works the camera like a pro. Jennifer Coolidge, as a one of Floyd's buxom dates, shows great dexterity with her false teeth. John Legend has precious little screen time, but his lead vocals are as strong and resonate as those on his new album Evolver. Sharon Leal, in a poorly developed role, is adequate. Affion Crockett, as her abusive, drugged-out rapper lover, is never convincing. Isaac Hayes makes a

cameo appearance, and it feels like an angel has entered the room.

Can't say that Matt Leonetti's cinematography adds any great aesthetics. The editing by William Henry and Paul Millspaugh lacks rhythm. The musical score uses old R&B songs mixed with original music by Stanley Clarke to good effect. Danielle Hollowell's costume design is the standout technical element. The iridescent jackets the boys wear are hip. One night when they sing at a small club on the road, Floyd has poured himself into a bright blue suit that is way too tight; a waist button pops off and nearly blinds a redneck. This bit of shtick is funny, but the ugly blue suit, that screams lounge singer, is what's truly memorable.

You will feel honored to see Bernie Mac give one of his final film performances. He leaves it all on the screen. Maybe the script is weak and the filmmaking is not Lee's best effort. But, Mac and Jackson carry the movie. They have charm to spare. When they're practicing their choreography, Louis chides Floyd for his missteps. Floyd complains that he is in pain, "I had a hip replacement." Louis responds, "You should have paid \$100 and gotten the deluxe model!" Audience members are getting the deluxe model when they buy a ticket to "Soul Men." And that deluxe model is the late Bernie Mac. He was a class act and someone we will always remember.

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Bits 'n' Pieces



Sondra Scroggins celebrates new school post, Obama victory

Sondra Scroggins has been named the new student vice president of Stanford Elementary Student Council in Las Vegas. Sondra had been following the election of the first African-American presidential candidate Barack Obama for months. A recent visit by Michelle Obama at the Doolittle Center furthered her determination to follow in his footsteps.

LL Cool J abandons the Janet Jackson Tour; rumors say a conflict emerged

(TMS) — As pop star Janet Jackson had recovered from a reported battle with vertigo and relaunched her nationwide "Rock Witchu Tour," Rap icon LL (Ladies Love) Cool J announced he was dropping out of the show. The official explanation was "scheduling conflicts" but rumors immediately surfaced that conflicts between Jackson and Cool J forced the rapper to quit. The 42-year-old Jackson had cancelled three early shows in the North American tour because of migraine headaches associated with vertigo — a form of dizziness and a feeling of imbalance. The nature of the disagreement between Jackson and Cool J was not revealed and there was no immediate announcement of a replacement for him in the tour.



LL Cool J

Jennifer Lopez signs with Universal to develop several new TV shows



Jennifer Lopez

(TMS) — Jennifer Lopez — singer, actor, dancer and recent mother — last week signed an agreement with Universal Media Studios to develop several new television programs. The two-year deal reunites Lopez with NBC and, in effect, gives Universal right of first refusal for any program developed by Lopez' Nuyorican Productions Company. Along with partner Simon Fields, Lopez has recently been pushing Nuyorican productions into a host of television projects including the sale of a small-screen version of the movie "Made in Manhattan" to ABC, a project known as "Amigas" to the Disney Channel and a story about her life to TLC.

Janet Jackson won't be rockin' any rescheduled tour dates

The 42-year-old singer is not choreographing any makeup dates for the seven "Rock Witchu" tour performances that were initially postponed because of her illness "due to conflicts in the singer's schedule," said a statement released by tour organizer Live Nation. The canceled stops, originally scheduled Sept. 29 to Oct. 13, include: Montreal; Boston; Philadelphia; Greensboro, N.C.; Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; Uncasville, Conn.; and Syracuse, N.Y. Jackson's publicist previously said she had been suffering from migraine-associated vertigo, which led to her canceling the string of shows. She was being treated for the illness, which is characterized by dizziness, imbalance and other symptoms.