
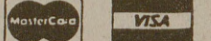


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'Mo' Better Blues' plays red hot

By JOHN RIGHTER

If the mark of a good director is his ability to make his viewers love and care about, or hate, his characters, then Spike Lee deserves accolades as truly great.

"Mo' Better Blues" is a wonderful, realistic drama about the determined struggle of a talented musician towards the fulfillment of his perceived destiny. Denzel Washington is the extremely talented Bleek Gilliam, a self-centered, but not careless, musician who struggles between his friends, his ladies, his band and his dream. The reality is that Bleek does not know what he wants — a fact that he is constantly reminded of.

Lee is Bleek's longtime friend and manager, Giant, an incompetent manager who continuously lets Bleek and the band down as well as himself with his serious gambling problem. Giant will end up as Bleek's salvation, but in a very unfortunate manner.

Lee, who wrote and produced "Mo' Better" (which is a reference to sexual intercourse), as well as starred in and directed the movie, places Bleek in several circumstances to diversify the plot and allow for his commentary. Bleek's two-timing nature, an arrangement that bothers him, is a problem with black males that Lee has spoken out against before. Bleek's cockiness (in one scene he tries to escape a jam when both his girlfriends arrive to see him perform wearing the same dress —ouch) comes across as callous, and Lee makes him pay with the loss of both women in a funny, poignant scene.

In a more disturbing predicament, Bleek and Giant are forced to try and renegotiate the band's contract with Beneath the Underdog club owners Moe and John Flatbush,



Spike Lee



Denzel Washington

a pair of tight-wad, obnoxious Jews. It's no secret that many African-Americans view the Jewish community as exploitative and labor robbing. Whether intentional or not, Lee only perpetuates this belief with the wimpy, reprehensible Flatbush brothers (although I must admit in a very amusing manner).

The Bleek Quintet — which also includes pianist Left Hand Lacey (Giancarlo Esposito), bassist Bottom Hammer (Bill Nunn), drummer Rhythm Jones (Jeff Watts) and saxophonist Shadow Henderson (Wesley Snipes) — battle with Bleek over control of the band and their pay. Shadow, as equally talented and driven as Bleek, is especially confrontational, creating several problems.

In the end, Bleek finally finds his peace, after much hardship. A giant kick of humility brings Bleek down to

Earth, and by the film's conclusion we find the circle broken (Bleek refuses to live his dream through his son — a luxury Bleek's mother did not afford him).

The true glory of "Mo' Better Blues" is the realistic, yet romantic, handling of the characters and settings. Lee's storyline tears you between Bleek and the friends and lovers he is willing to walk over. You want to love Bleek, a basically good guy, but the man makes it very tough at times.

Washington is wonderful as Bleek, as is Lee as Giant, a loveable loser worth rooting for even when you know he'll let you down. Bleek's ladies, Indigo (Joie Lee) and Clarke (Cynda Williams), are supportive, intelligent women, betrayed by their love to Bleek.

Wearing the director's hat, Lee creates evocative club settings that

set the perfect stage for the film's credible jazz music (The movie loosely based on the life of John Coltrane and features some of his music).

Lee makes the most of dark settings and moving, panoramic shots to bridge a dreamy, night-like quality with the film's daytime reality.

Despite "Mo' Better"'s lack of forward adventure or humor, Lee gives a slick, fast-paced film that pops its humor at the right places.

"Mo' Better Blues" is not the controversial statement of "Do The Right Thing." It is, however, a classy, endearing drama perfectly packaged around the romantic allure of the jazz underworld.

"Mo' Better" won't strike the chord that "Do The Right Thing" or "School Daze" did, but it should create something else — an Academy Award.

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