

Trapped in America's inner-cities

BY KARAN SHETTY

On the surface, the story behind the movie *Slam* is exceedingly simple. You've heard it all before: guy sells drugs, guy gets caught, guy goes to jail, guy tries to mend his ways.

This is no Hollywood morality tale however. There are many aspects to the film which make it stand out from others in the "ghetto" genre. For one, the cinematography presents the material with a visual style so mundane it's actually refreshing. The camera doesn't try to glamorize inner-city life in the way other movies are often guilty of doing. Verisimilitude

is the effect director Marc Levin seems to be going for and he is more than successful in his efforts. You can actually feel the grime of the jail cells and the squalor of urban housing.

There is more to the movie, however, than its shocking visual realism. Ironically it is the simplicity of the story that gives the movie its depth. One doesn't have to listen to a sermon or an intellectual discussion on the state of African Americans in America's inner cities to understand their problems. This movie is so emotionally raw that you can actually feel their entrapment. Entrapment, after all is what this movie is basically about.

The protagonist, Raymond Joshua (played brilliantly by Saul Williams), is a small-time drug dealer who is busted with enough marijuana to put him away for a long time. Either he cops a plea and spends a shortened sentence in jail or goes to trial, loses (which he knows he will) and serves an extended sentence.

Raymond can't get his mind around the fact that if he fights for his freedom he will inevitably do more time. He knows he is guilty but he doesn't feel guilty. He deals drugs, not to make money, but to stay alive. He is not ready to face even shortened jail time either because he knows from experience,

while waiting for bail, that jail is a horrible place where he will find no salvation.

Raymond is trapped and Levin uses him to characterize the average African American youth in America's large urban centres. There's a shot in the movie where they show a diagram of how slaves were crammed, row upon row, into the ships that crossed the Dark Passage. The descendants of those slaves may have it better off today, but in the inner city they're still shackled together and crammed into a way of life from which it is difficult to escape. The film is trying to tell us that in a justice system where clemency is unheard of

it is nearly impossible for anyone trapped in such a system to become upwardly mobile.

The second half of the movie veers off, strangely enough, into the world of urban poetry houses. Raymond is a writer who expresses his thoughts in rap music — and later in the film, poetry — whenever he finds himself scared or in trouble. The title of the movie comes from the name given to open mic poetry readings.

Slam also happens to have an amazing soundtrack. If you're into hiphop I highly recommend it. The film played to kudos at the Cannes and Sundance Film Festivals, so hopefully it will get widespread release some time soon.

Maestro's Back with *Built to Last*

BY ASHIR SIDDIQUI AND KAVERI GUPTA

Recently, Maestro Fresh Wes led a brigade of today's hottest hiphop artists to Halifax to entertain students at St. Mary's University. That is if today was ten years ago.

The Maestro is well known in Canadian circles, with hits like "Drop the Needle" and "Let Your Backbone Slide", but he has been relatively unheard of over the last five years. Well, it seems he's back — and he's as proud as ever of the Canadian hiphop scene.

After moving to New York, Maestro released his album *Naah Dis Kid Can't be from Canada* in 1993. Despite his time in the States, Maestro still considers himself a Canadian artist.

"Me going over there showed my uniqueness 'cause I wasn't from there and I was never stressing to be from there. They acknowledged me and gave me respect and I felt accepted. I felt like

hiphop accepted me while I was down there so it was a big deal. But Canada is my foundation. It's my home."

Since that album, Maestro hasn't really been heard from. During his five year hiatus, however, he has been producing and managing independent acts such as Guage and Cellar Dwellers. But taking the stage is his first love.

"At the end of the day, y'know, my talents aren't just managing groups or what have you. There's me as an artist."

Which is why he's making a comeback — this time on a Canadian record label (Attic Records). The album, *Built to Last*, will be released on October 20th.

"When my album comes out it will be critiqued harder than a new cat's. If I actually do what I do well, it'll be like, 'Ahh he's supposed to,' and if I don't do well it'll be like, 'Ahh he fell off'."

The new album features collaborations with Snow, Ghetto Concept, Choclair, Holly Marshall

and Glenn Lewis. Producers include Too Rude, DRK, Quattro (from Ghetto Concept) and J-Roll. The debut single, "Clap ya Handz/Turn it Out", has definite potential to become a party jam for 1998. Based on this single, which he performed at the concert, you can tell Maestro is not stuck in the past and has evolved a new sound.

The fact that most of the artists on the album are Canadian reflects Maestro's opinion that Canada is definitely a force to be reckoned with on the North American hiphop scene. He does, however, see the need for more work to be done — both to make Canadian artists' presence felt and to increase the popularity of hiphop.

"[We need] more artists coming up with bigger songs, heavier songs, harder songs. Hits, we need hits. And not just from one camp or one clique, but as a whole we have to come up with that. It's not going to take one artist. It's going to take the whole."

Write for the Gazette
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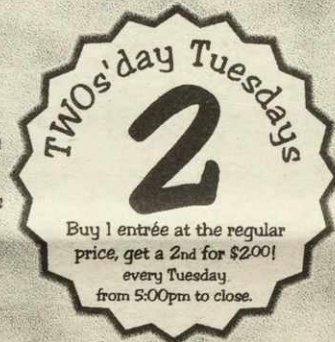
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