

“I Ain’t Down With That Fifty Movie Cauz They Let A White Guy Do It!”

Recent barbershop quote from director John Singleton

Before I get to the review of *Get Rich Or Die Tryin’* I must address all the potential critics, activists and haters who are never gonna like the film simply because it was made in the first place and, like John Singleton, because it was made by an award winning white director. For John to clown *Get Rich Or Tryin’* for having a white director to direct a hip-hop film when John similarly backed a white director, Craig Brewer, to make a hip-hop film is laughable. I mean its to easy to hate on *Get Rich* because it glorifies negative images of young black men, promotes drug dealing as a viable alternative to staying school and getting a honest job or Hollywood letting another rapper getting to make a violent urban film instead of making a positive black film. To anyone, mainly intellectual liberals or self-righteous buppies, who will proudly say they will not see *Get Rich Or Die Tryin’* for the previously mentioned three hater reasons, then you will definitely have missed a good movie. It’s not great, but it can be over time—a long time. I will directly address all the *Get Rich Or Die Tryin’* haters in a separate article.

If you have not been into of hip-hop in the past five years or totally are living in a cave like Osma, then you might not know what *Get Rich Or Die Tryin’* is about. But for the rest of us billions on the planet who are into hip-hop we all know that *Get Rich* is the basically the life story of Curtis Jackson a.k.a. Fifty Cent. In one sentence, Marcus had a mom who was dealing drugs and after violent death he sees no hope in life and eventually becomes a dealer himself until he discovers rapping as a way to deal with emotional pain and escape a predictable thug life in the hood. We as the audience spends the first fifteen minutes of the film watching a Young Marcus, played admirably by Marc John Jeffries. We have seen this cinematic scenario before of growing up without a father in the hood negatively effecting the kid’s choices and life options. This is a highly relatable experience for many urban as well suburban kids. There really is no mention of his Marcus’s dad not because of bad writing, but because it is an unspoken rumor in the film that is not addressed until the film’s climax. Young Marcus, who called himself MC Young Caesar, has a genuine interest in rapping. But Marcus also wanted expensive material things, like the best sneaks, that could only be achieved by his mom slangin’ dope. Newcomer Serena Reader plays Katrina, Marcus’s mom. This is Serena’s first big theatrical role and she does a solid job. The performance of hustling hood mama with a heart is again nothing new in urban cinema, but highly necessary in this story. Whether you think it’s a stereotypical black female role or not, women like Katrina do exist. We all know of far too many young sistas that get sucked into the street life and then become one of the many hundreds of thousands of unsolved homicides that barely if ever get reported by the national media unless they was white, blond and had blue eyes.

Again we have seen the 'do or die drug dealers all around me" childhood scenes many times, like in *Blue Hill Avenue*. Sheridan or writer Terence Winter do nothing exciting or innovative with this early part of the film except lay the foundation of angst, pain and eventual motivation for Marcus to become a hardcore gangsta rapper when he grows up. It is the young kid that started a neighborhood rap group with his peers. One of those kids was Charlene, Rhyon Nicole Brown, who was forced to move from her neighborhood when her parents heard the explicit raps that Young Marcus was doing. They obviously feared pregnancy around the corner and sent her packing down to the burbs down South. A young Marcus soon feels the realities of his mom's career choice as she is killed in a grisly and merciless manner that is wished upon no one. Bill Duke now enters as Levar, the supreme drug lord. He is at Katrina's funeral not merely to pay his respects, but to make sure a drug turf war is avoided with the Columbians. He plays a sophisticated black crime Don--very much an old skool mobster. Levar is really too above all the riff raff of daily killings, beatings and shootings in his deadly drug empire.

After his mom's passing, Marcus has to move in fulltime in with his grandparents played by veteran actors Sullivan Walker and Viola Parker. Marcus scraps with his cousins over sleeping arrangements and has to grow up in a cramp and dark basement during his teen years. His dreams of rap stardom are put on hold as he joins the family business of dope dealing. You can surmise that his grandparents are good honest and hard working people, but since they could not save their daughter from the streets it is not expected that they can save Marcus either. Sheridan only shows one scene where Grandpa goes off on a teenage Marcus for finding a loaded gun in the basement and getting caught with drugs at his high school. But even then Fifty snaps back to his Grandpa that he's a "gangsta fo life" and rather be one than a broke black janitor. Its left on that empty note--like the proud Jamaican Grandpa would saying nothing back to Marcus. A major weakness in *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'* is no sense of accountability by responsible black adults or influential role models on Marcus's life. Everyone in the hood is not a damn drug dealer or gangsta. Marcus like any young brother had teachers, shopkeepers, and regular boring friends that just went to class everyday and were not dealers. If he clowned them all then show that he did.

Marcus continues as a young man trying to find his place in the dope gang. His presence is always lightly being monitored from the outskirts by his mom's dealer and maybe off and again lover Majestic. From Oz's powerful and mesmerizing Simon Adebise, nobody has that big black foreign bad guy shit down as good as Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje. Majestic is seen early on in the film always cool, calm and in control as he waits patiently for his turn to move up in Levar's lucrative criminal empire. Majestic is more of a Judas than a Scarface. He is such a loyal soldier to Levar that even Marcus has no idea that he is using him to be his best worker bee in his crack ring to curry favor with Levar. Marcus is constantly praised and given favoritism by Majestic, which leaves Junebug, Majestic's top boy, hating on Marcus and wishing to take him out of the picture.

Marcus really respects Majestic, but it is Levar whom he idolizes and thinks can do no wrong. Levar is the only god that Marcus wants to worship even if it means losing his soul or his life one day.

The only truly exceptional acting performances in *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'* are Terrance Howard and Joy Bryant. Terence has playing a Southern bad boy down to perfection. This time he's not Djay, a "take no-shit" ordinary brotha and wannbe rapper Memphis pimp, but Bama, a "take no-shit" ordinary brotha and wannbe rap manager Cleveland repping con. It would be too easy to say that Terence's DJay and Bama are interchangeable characters. I don't know if Terence Winter wrote Bama before *Hustle* was in the can or even if Sheridan knew or cared about Terence in *Hustle* when he was shooting *Get Rich*. I do know that having a hardcore Southerner being Marcus's guardian angel or protector/advisor/manager was a great call. Bama's plain talking Southern drawl and sensibility is what allows his personality and words stand out among the slurry of thick New York accent and predictable at times thug dialogue. Bama even gives a shout out to Terence's hometown of Cleveland while leaving jail.

Joy Bryant as Charlene keeps increasing her Hollywood stock making something meaningful out of the small roles she is given. No scene is better in the film than when she reunites with Marcus after many years. She is now a beautiful young dance instructor. At lunch with Marcus and his top crack selling crew, Charlene asks Marcus what he does for a living. Marcus cracks a smile and says he is a gangster. Joy asks Marcus what does he really do and he says a rapper. She still does not believe him and says stop kidding around. Marcus looks at his boys and then says he is a gangsta rapper. Marcus finally acknowledging to himself, his friends and the woman he loves that he is a gangsta who also raps is the essence the whole theme of *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'*. As we watch Charlene reluctantly accept Marcus as a criminal who also is an aspiring MC on the side, we the audience also accept that inevitable fact. Unlike Eminem's *8-Mile*, which showed him being launched from the competitive MC battle rap world, in *Get Rich* we are watching for two hours the purest and clearest cinematic depiction of how one is a thug/ustler/criminal and then morphs into a rapper that writes and raps about his past life as a thug/hustler/criminal.

This is not great verbal acting coming from Fifty, but it is the type of natural hood cinema-verite performances that Sheridan masterfully pulls out of Fifty. Sheridan knows who to work well to create dramatic tension and between a novice actor, and a more seasoned professionally trained actor like Joy Bryant. Sometimes the best acting moments with Fifty are with Joy. For example, when she tells Marcus after he is recovering from his nine bullet wounds that he is only a shell of the man she fell in love with and is going to let their son grow up with a weak daddy. Marcus cries and vows to give up relying on pain killers and wallowing in self pity over walking with a limp, having a body constantly in pain and having to talk with his jaw wired shut. Another good acting moment for Fifty is when Marcus confronts Levar in prison about him telling the truth about him being his father.

You can see in Fifty's eyes the pain and confusion he wants to hide at knowing Levar never was man enough to tell him he was his son. It would have saved him years of believing he had no dad and also his dad was whom he looked up to and idolized in the first place. This is not said in the film all this comes from watching Fifty's face as Levar tells him what he does not want to really hear. There is not a lot of talking in these scenes for Fifty like lunch with Charlene, Levar in prison or the recovery one, but they are emotional windows into the acting depth that Fifty can bring out when guided in the right way by Sheridan.

No matter how good *Get Rich*' is as a modern gangsta rap film, it does have its shortcomings in the last act. Blame it on naïve urban filmmaking on Sheridan or Winter's script relying on too many 'hood clichés. You would think from watching *Get Rich* that the NYPD, NYPD narcotics division or DEA had no idea what was going down in the Levar drug empire. And in fact Levar says he is only going to jail as a political favor and not because he gives a damn about doing hard time. Even in the Sopranos Tony and his crew are always wary of being bugged by the Feds, paying off the right cops and politicians and not trusting anyone because they might be a snitch. In the *Get Rich* world never is Marcus ever truly worried about going to jail. Just driving around in a flashy new expensive car with dealer plates with no license would get him stopped by the cops once a week.

And the only time Marcus does get seriously busted is because the cops are looking for a gun that Marcus used to shoot up the Columbians that paralyzed his homie. Some dope is planted at Marcus's crib by someone close to him. Why this happens is never really questioned by Marcus. He gives no thought to being set up by one of his own loyal crew members or even by a jealous Majestic. Every thing comes easy to Marcus and he barely casts any serious worry or doubt about going to prison. Too many urban black kids already think the penal system is a joke and no big deal. *Get Rich* will do nothing to end that myth. Marcus buys a seaside house and we're to think it happened automatically without any scrutinizing. He is not a crack dealer anymore, so Sheridan and Winter leave the audience guessing that he saved up bags and bags of drug money for a dream house with Charlene and his son. This is highly unlikely for a even a top dealer.

But at some point we have to transition Marcus from reformed gangsta to gangsta rapper. Marcus leaves prison with the intent of giving up his old ways of crime and wants to be a rapper fulltime. Bama is there to watch his career and Justice his old crack crew friend is there to keep an eye on him for Majestic. The world of hip-hop is so lightly skipped over that Sheridan tries to make it seem that a few setbacks not getting a record deal in New York means that Marcus has no choice, but to go back to being a thug or a criminal. Clearly Majestic wants his own "pet" hardcore wannabe rapper named Dangerous to be the only star gangsta rapper, but that would have nothing to do with selling Marcus selling his mixed-tapes on the streets. *Get Rich* should've shown Majestic threatening A&R execs if they help Marcus's career to reinforce Marcus struggle to live a legit life.

Then when Bama suggests robbing the Columbians and Marcus says yes it makes some sense. The way Sheridan has it now in *Get Rich* Bama and Marcus decide to go pull off a major cash heist like you would decide to go to the ATM.

Even Sheridan and Winter and especially Dr. Dre, who got a writing credit somehow, would have to know that stealing from Columbians would either get Marcus and Bama killed later no matter how well they covered their tracks. Or at least Majestic would be killed by the Columbians for keeping the money that Justice gave him after shooting Marcus nine times. Also, scenes where Majestic has a NYPD cop killed in broad daylight would not only mean that Levar does more prison time, but it would mean that Majestic himself and his all-black crew would be under constant blast by the NYPD and their narcotics division.

If you forget those facts then the final scene where Bama shoots Majestic is treated like its okay because Majestic killed Marcus's mother. Or even something so simplistic like the gun used to shoot Majestic is legally registered to one of Marcus's uncles, so that fact makes Majestic's death okay. In Hollywood big budget urban films that works, but in real life when you rob major criminal organizations or even kill a local drug lord in front of his whole crew, then you don't get to go on and have a happy life. Somebody is going to kill you, your family or your friends. Sheridan does not want to deal with these real hood issues as the film winds down. He just settles for Marcus not being the one who killed Majestic and going on to new and prosperous rap career. But we are suppose to be so swept up in the moment of Marcus at his breakthrough Fourth Of July concert that we the audience are just waiting to see the credits start rolling.

I can't hate on *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'* because it tries to tie up all its loose ends at the end of the film. Almost every Hollywood does that, but I can fault Sheridan and Winter for not being more inventive with the film's climax. What I can say is that just like *Scarface* was panned roundly by critics and later went on to be a hood classic. The same will happen for Fifty's loosely autobiographical tale. Film critics do not determine the success of hood films--it's the bootleggers on the block that do. As folks in the 'hood keep buying the *Get Rich* bootleg DVDs they do it not to cheat Fifty or Paramount, but because the demand is that damn high to see the film right away. They should start putting an asterisk after certain urban films that are release to adjust the gross to how much it would've made if their bootleg DVDs were not selling as fast as the legit theater tickets. But without a doubt I liked *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'* and it will touch you even if you know Fifty's story backward and forward. I give *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'* five cheesecakes out of five. It's worth seeing in the theaters and not just on a borrowed bootleg DVD.

Sincerely,

David L. Watts a.k.a. Money Train