

"Aces" fails to fulfill vast potential

Numerous problems arise in Joe Carnahan's overly stylized, poorly written "Smokin' Aces."

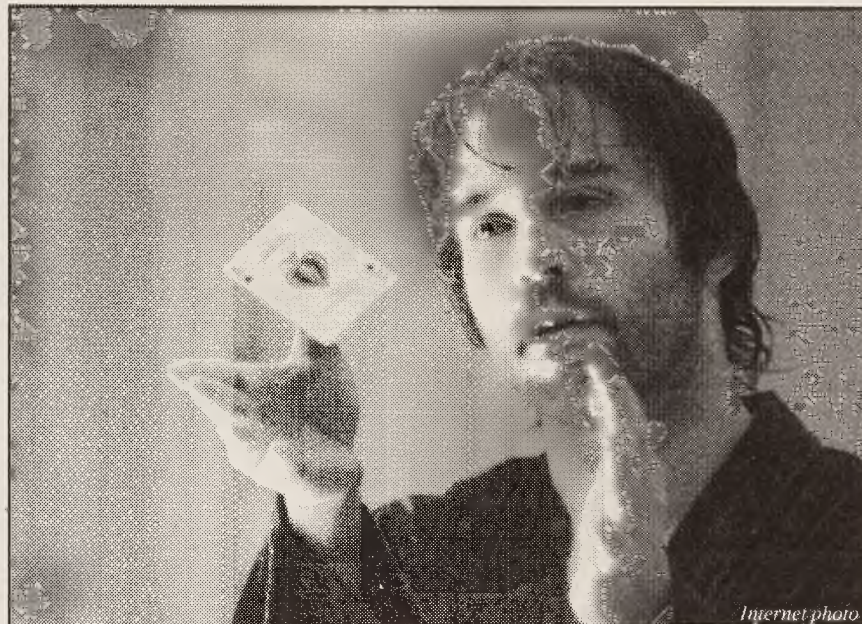
BY ALEX ASHE
Features Editor

Ever since the breakthrough success of Quentin Tarantino's first two films, "Reservoir Dogs" and "Pulp Fiction," there have been a plethora of imitators attempting to equal the films' magnitude on the stylish crime genre. "Post-Tarantino" has even become a semi-legitimate genre. Last year's most notable addition to the group of copycats was "Lucky Number Slevin," a worthy effort that ultimately did not match up to the classics of the 90's. The latest film to fit into this category is Joe Carnahan's "Smokin' Aces" which has the premise of "Rat Race" mixed with the action of a Schwarzenegger movie and eventually, like "Lucky Number Slevin," tries desperately to replicate the revolutionary twist-ending of 1995's "The Usual Suspects."

Like the aforementioned classics, "Smokin' Aces" is an ensemble film, boasting a cast of stars including Jeremy Piven, Ben Affleck, Ryan Reynolds, Ray Liotta, Andy Garcia, Jason Bateman, as well as music artists Alicia Keys and Common, both making their film debuts. The plot

revolves around mob witness/Vegas entertainer Buddy "Aces" Israel (Piven) and the mafia's million-dollar bounty for the hitman who kills him. Several parties of hitmen (including Keys) head to Lake Tahoe in hopes of assassinating the dazed Israel who has been holed up in his penthouse suite. Liotta, who starred in Carnahan's previous directorial effort, 2002's "Narc," and Reynolds turn in solid performances as FBI agents trying to get to Israel before the potential hitmen, hoping he will turn in his corrupt entourage (which includes Common) and subsequently enter the Witness Protection Program. As unoriginal as the plot seems, there is potential for it to be compelling. However, the movie often goes on long, unfocused tangents that eventually lead to "Smokin' Aces" becoming a complete mess of a film.

Among the laundry-list of problems with "Smokin' Aces" is that it has no sense of identity. From a comedic standpoint, there are some moments of witty dialogue a la "Pulp Fiction," but at other times, the intended humor is borderline-slapstick and unfunny. The film's score is often ill-suited, as it tries to create a dramatic, tragic mood during parts where doing so just does not make sense. The remainder of the film is full of fast-paced action, which is entertaining at first, but soon grows old. Hurting the film even more is



In the action-packed "Smokin' Aces," Jeremy Piven makes a turn from the comedic roles of "Entourage" and "Old School" that made him famous.

its lack of credibility, as some times the bullets seem to be made of plastic. Many characters are completely unnecessary and merely appear to be attempts to fit as many stars as possible into the movie. As the story drifts away from the original premise, the movie becomes focused on keeping the audience guessing about who lives and dies. However, the film's useless and uninteresting twist ending tops the long list of maladies. Unlike last year's "The Illusionist," the plot twist is forced, insignificant, and unsatisfying, and it seems as if Carnahan threw in the twist simply to complicate the story.

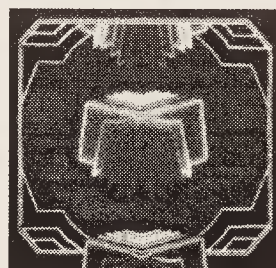
Unfortunately, since "The Usual Suspects," a twist ending in films of this genre is considered mandatory, and instead of being a huge surprise, this one just makes the viewer feel like the whole movie was a waste of time. There is an immediate letdown, as there is nothing that the audience is obligated to care about.

What made "Pulp Fiction" so unique and stylish was Tarantino's cleverness as a director and writer. "Smokin' Aces" misses the mark in this regard, showing minimal evidence of any creativity or intelligence. Ultimately, the movie is high on style and short on substance

Unique bands' upcoming albums flourish

BY ALEX ASHE
Features Editor

Arcade Fire Neon Bible



★★★★
(out of 5)

Best Track:
"Windowsill"
Merge Records
Out March 6th

Seemingly coming from nowhere, the Montreal-based Arcade Fire started the diverse-instrument phenomenon with their masterpiece debut LP, "Funeral," in 2004. Along with skyrocketing to one of alternative music's hottest commodities, the band paved the way to success for fellow Canadian

outfit Broken Social Scene, as well as last year's indie darlings, the Raleigh-based Annuals. Fittingly, the Arcade Fire's second album, "Neon Bible," is one of 2007's most anticipated releases, and just because it does not quite equal its predecessor, the record proves to be worth the wait and the hype.

"Black Mirror," the album's first single, is somewhat evocative of "Neighborhood #2 (Laika)" from "Funeral," as it starts off "Neon Bible" on an upbeat note, which carries over to the next track, "Keep the Car Running." The strong, melodic title track follows, but unfortunately, it only runs slightly over the two-minute mark.

The grandiose fourth track, "Intervention," sounds like the beginning of a church service, thanks to its extremely heavy organ use. Sonically, the band has not changed very much since "Funeral," but if anything,

their sound has become a bit darker. Appropriately, this alteration is most evident on the fifth track, "Black Waves/Bad Vibrations," which initially sounds similar to early Sonic Youth.

"Windowsill," in which frontman Win Butler asks, "MTV, what have you done to me / Save my soul, set me free," is more simple than the other tracks on "Neon Bible," but it manages to establish itself as the best of the bunch. The tenth track, "No Cars Go," is a spiritual epic that rises and falls like a Beethoven symphony. The morose "My Body is a Cage" serves as a perfect closing track to the album, finishing with Butler shouting, "Set my spirit free / Set my body free."

Not every track on "Neon Bible" is a masterpiece, but that doesn't stop it from being a terrific follow-up to "Funeral" and a superb display of the Arcade Fire's creativity and originality.

!!! Myth Takes



★★★★
(out of 5)

Best Track:
"Yadnus"
Warp Records
Out March 6th

Embarking on a career as a rock star is surely exciting, but life must be ten times more exhilarating if you're in a band named !!! (pronounced chk-chk-chk). On the bright side, your band is easily recognizable because of its name. However, your group's name rarely appears in conversations because of its awkward pronunciation and "Spin" labels you the "hardest band

to Google." Such setbacks have not stopped the ambitious dance-punk outfit from garnering a cult following and the opening spot for the Red Hot Chili Peppers' latest European tour. Following the success of 2004's "Louden Up Now," !!! has returned with their fresh blend of disco, funk, new-wave, and rock for a third album, "Myth Takes."

Living up to its reputation as a dance band, !!! incorporates a surf-rock guitar into the brief yet impressive, foot-tapping title track to begin the record. The band tries a different approach on the next track, "All My Heroes Are Weirdos," which sounds like it features a drum line. "Heart of Hearts," which will serve as the album's first single, is the six-minute-long fifth track. The song provides the album's catchiest chorus before unexpectedly delving into a two-minute prog-rock outro. On "Sweet Life," the band throws a curve

ball, focusing mainly on vocals instead of hectic instrumentals.

One could theorize that hearing the Chili Peppers' "Can't Stop" so many times last summer inspired the opening drum beat of the seventh track, "Yadnus." However, instead of a half-expected John Frusciante guitar riff, one reminiscent of Funkadelic axeman Eddie Hazel follows, creating the base for the strong, funky number. The tenth and final song, "Infinifold," features a much different pace from the other nine tracks and ends the album on a delicate note.

Excluding the closing track, every song on "Myth Takes" is dance-provoking, which is a testament to !!! staying faithful to its genre. Some moments of repetition and others of mild monotony do occur, but "Myth Takes" establishes itself as an expansive, rock-solid effort from one of indie-rock's more unique acts.