

5B ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Gumbel has faith in his new series "Public Eye." See story on page 7B.

LaFace Records Motown of '90s?

By Sonia Murray
THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

ATLANTA - TLC will tell you themselves.

No one thought that Tionne "T-Boz" Watkins, Lisa "Left-Eye" Lopes and Rozonda "Chilli" Thomas would make the transition from the cartoonish, condom-wearing r&b trio of 1992 to the best-selling female group of all time - except them. And their then-burgeoning Atlanta-based label, LaFace Records.

Vocalist Toni Braxton didn't have a gimmick or trendy persona to overcome. But she did have to follow the success of a 7 million-record-selling debut, plus a Grammy for best new artist. A daunting task, but not for LaFace, which repackaged Braxton as a sex symbol (her barely clad body on the cover of Vibe translated into the magazine's best-selling issue) and turned her second album, *Secrets*, into another multimillion seller.

Now, vocalist Usher Raymond's second CD, "My Way," is out, with the current single, "You Make Me Wanna," hitting at the top of the R&B charts. LaFace Records can safely count Raymond as its third success at doing what has become notoriously difficult to do in the music business: hurdling the sophomore slump.

"They're not only hurdling it, LaFace seems to have that down pat and is going on to run marathons with their records," says author and cultural critic Nelson George.

Of course, luck is a factor. And LaFace has improved its chances greatly by letting go of a number of acts (Jermaine Jackson, A Few Good Men) after first albums performed poorly.

Still, record sales and industry observers such as George affirm that the 8-year-old boutique label has a winning formula.

"It's a combination of (LaFace executive) Davett (Singletary) and the artist development process,

See USHER on page 6B



TLC

Va. theaters pull "Kiss The Girls"

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FREDERICKSBURG, Va. - A movie theater chain in an area still reeling from the abductions and slayings of three girls has pulled a film about a serial killer who preys on young women.

RC Theaters decided Friday against playing "Kiss the Girls" in the Fredericksburg-area cinemas after a Spotsylvania resident complained that the movie hits too close to home.

Sofia Silva, 16, disappeared from the front step of her house last September. In May, sisters Kfistin Lisk, 15, and Kati Lisk, 12, vanished from their house moments after returning from school.

All three lived in Spotsylvania County, and their bodies were dumped in creeks within 40 miles of their homes. Investigators said a serial killer is probably responsible.

In the film, Morgan Freeman stars as a Washington police detective who discovers that his niece has disappeared from a college in North Carolina. When he arrives in Durham, N.C., to investigate, he learns that area police already are investigating the deaths of seven other girls and searching for two more.

Previews of the film have played in theaters for several weeks.

John Epperly, the district manager for RC Theaters, said that after a woman complained about the subject of the film, he obtained a copy of the text of the film and reviewed it.

Since the Lisk sisters' slayings, the area has become sensitive about the possibility of a serial killer stalking girls. Parents have become intensely protective of their children and wary of strangers in their neighborhoods.

Aware of the community's feeling, Epperly called officials at the theater chain's Reisterstown, Md., headquarters and told them of his concerns. Officials of RC Theaters and the film's distributor, Paramount, quickly concurred, Epperly said.

"Once everybody in Maryland (at RC's headquarters) found out about how sensitive this is and that the killer was still at large, everybody was very sensitive to that. There was nobody opposed to taking the film out."

The blackout affects RC's cinemas in the Fredericksburg area and two in Culpeper.

See KISS on page 7B

A tasty appetizer



PHOTO/20TH CENTURY FOX

Vivica A. Fox, Nia Long and Vanessa L. Williams discuss troubling family business in the family drama "Soul Food." The film is one of the few times an African American family has been depicted as normal. Each delivers a solid performance.

'Soul Food' has good acting, weak story

By Winfred B. Cross
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Soul Food
Starring: Vanessa L. Williams, Vivica A. Fox, Nia Long, Irma P. Hall, Brandon Hammond, Michael Beach, Mekhi Phifer and Gina Ravera
Directed By George Tillman Jr.
Fox 2000 Films
Now playing

☆☆ 1/2

Going to see "Soul Food" on an empty stomach would be a huge mistake. The mouth-watering, cholesterol-filled dishes will have you running to the concession stand only to be disappointed with finding only over-priced popcorn and candy. The meals are the glue that hold this likable, but highly predictable story together. Just watching the care taken in preparing the culinary delights is interesting in itself.

So is the acting. Finally, Vivica A. Fox has gotten a role which exploits her enormous acting ability. She's wonderful as the fiery Maxine, the middle child in a family of three sister. She's got a house full of kids, a loving husband (Jeffrey Sams) and a no-nonsense attitude which makes her speak her mind. Maxine's a thorn in the side to older sister Teri, played brilliantly by

Vanessa L. Williams. Teri's a smart, rich lawyer who looks at everything logically - feelings be damned. She also doesn't mind reminding the family she pays for everything. She's straight-laced, but when pressed, reverts to her "sistah" roots (watching Williams wield a knife is priceless). The tension between Teri and Maxine gives the film a badly-needed edge,

which keeps your attention.

So does the adorable Brandon Hammond as the precocious Ahmad. The story is told through his eyes and voice. He's a breath of fresh air in a sea of bratty kid stars. He brings Ahmad to life with a child-like zeal that belies his youth.

Then there's Big Mama Joe, played by Irma P. Hall, who is becoming somewhat of a stock matriarchal figure in Hollywood - the Hattie McDaniels of the '90s. That's fine, because Hall plays this and all her other roles with dignity and grace. She's as lovable as Mama Joe as a favorite stuffed toy.

Frankly, there's not a bad performance in the bunch. So what's wrong with "Soul Food?" The story. Although I enjoyed watching this sappy tale, it was as predictable as my morning routine. Everything is telegraphed a mile ahead. It's obvious Lem (Mekhi Phifer) is going back to jail, Miles (the underrated Michael Beach) and



PHOTOS COURTESY OF 20TH CENTURY FOX

Gina Raver dances for Michael Beach in "Soul Food."

See SOUL FOOD on page 7B

'Soul Food' debuts strongly

By John Horn
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES - The heavily hyped movie debut of the new DreamWorks SKG studio was not too sweet.

"The Peacemaker" debuted in first place, but its opening was at the low end of industry estimates. The much less promoted new comedy "Soul Food" actually did superior business on a per-screen basis and could end up out-grossing George Clooney and Nicole Kidman in "The Peacemaker."

DreamWorks is the film-TV-multimedia studio created by Steven Spielberg, David Geffen and former Disney executive Jeffrey Katzenberg.

The only other new film in wide release, Anthony Hopkins and Alec Baldwin's "The Edge," fared poorly, finishing a distant fourth. In limited release in New York only, "The Ice Storm" was popular.

"L.A. Confidential" lost only a fraction of its audience from its debut a week ago, but the second-week numbers were far worse for "Wes Craven Presents Wishmaster" and "A Thousand Acres." "The Full Monty" continued to perform extremely well for an art film.

The top 20 movies at North American theaters Friday through Sunday, followed by studio, gross, number of theater locations, receipts per location, total gross and number of weeks in release, as compiled by Entertainment Data Inc. and Exhibitor Relations Co. Inc.:

1. "The Peacemaker," DreamWorks, \$12.3 million, 2,362 locations, \$5,213 average, \$12.3 million, one week.
2. "In & Out," Paramount, \$11.22 million, 2,268 locations, \$4,949 average, \$30.4 million, two weeks.
3. "Soul Food," Fox, \$11.19 million, 1,339 locations, \$8,363 average, \$11.19 million, one week.
4. "The Edge," Fox, \$7.7 million, 2,351 locations, \$3,289 average, \$7.7 million, one week.
5. "The Game," PolyGram, \$5 million, 2,521 locations, \$1,989 average, \$35.8 million, three weeks.
6. "L.A. Confidential," Warner Bros., \$4.4 million, 824 locations, \$5,367 average, \$11.6 million, two weeks.
7. "Wes Craven Presents Wishmaster," Live, \$3.1 million, 2,502 locations, \$1,253 average.

See MOVIES on page 6B

Boyz II Men return with 'Evolution'

Boyz II Men
Evolution
Various producers
Motown

☆☆☆ 1/2

Evolution may be too bold a title for the latest Boyz II Men release. After all, one listen and all the trademarks are there - nickel-slick production, silky harmony and great song selection. So what's new?

A closer listen reveals better writing on the group's part. Shawn Stockman's "Doin' Just Fine" may be his finest composition. It's certainly the best way to open this CD. The lead vocals are as confident as these guys have ever delivered. The harmony is exemplary. "All Night Long" is a collaboration between the group, producer Keith Crouch (Andre's nephew) and John Smith. It's a low-key, hip-hop ballad with care-free vocals. "I Can't Let Her Go" is

dance-driven, borrowing from Cameo's "I Just Wanna Be." It's one of the few occasions the group has cut loose on a dance number since the CoolHighHarmony CD and it works effortlessly. It works in large part due to the tireless Sean "Puffy" Combs production.

The inclusion of veteran producers adds depth to this release. Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis offer outstanding work on the haunting "Four Seasons of Loneliness," a ballad dripping with passion.

Somehow, the group found a way to sing tighter, sweeter - just plain better. It was the perfect perfect for the first single. "Human II (Don't Turn Your Back On Me)" flows as smoothly as the Human League's original. The group also does an capella cover "Can You Stand The Rain," a song Jam and Lewis wrote and produced for New Edition. Ironically, the group handles the production.

Babyface contributes several songs, the best of which is the

tear-jerker "A Song For Mama," featured in the motion picture "Soul Food." It's destined to be the Mother's Day song for years to come.

The release's brightest moment comes on the prayer-like "Dear God." Sappy? Yes, but give Wanya Morris this kind of outlet and his gospel roots shine. It's a vocal tour de force for the entire group, actually - combining sweet harmonies with church riffs. Impressive.

See SWV on page 7B



Sounds