

Rock 'n' Roll: Muddy Waters and a cast of several

Written by Darnell Martin

Directed by Darnell Martin

Adrien Brody ... Leonard Chess
Jeffrey Wright ... Muddy Waters
Gabrielle Union ... Geneva Wade
Columbus Short ... Little Walter
Cedric the Entertainer ... Willie Dixon
Emmanuelle Chriqui ... Revetta Chess
Eamonn Walker ... Howlin' Wolf
Mos Def ... Chuck Berry
Beyoncé Knowles ... Etta James

Keith Richards: Mr. Waters. We're big fans.

We named our band after one of your songs.

Muddy Waters: Yeah?

Keith Richards: Rolling Stone.

The son of a poor black Mississippi sharecropper

One might as well call Cadillac Records the Muddy Waters Story... or the Muddy Waters and Little Walter Stories... or the Muddy Waters and Little Walter and Leonard Chess Stories... or the Muddy Waters and Little Walter and Leonard Chess and Etta James Stories.

In the earliest scenes, the viewer is taken to the cotton fields of Mississippi, where Waters (Jeffrey Wright) is discovered and recorded by a fellow from the Library of Congress seeking out the sounds of folk music in America. In a parallel development, young Leonard Chess (Adrien Brody) is revealed having ambitions to become a financial success... to prove to polite society that he's worth something. A Jewish immigrant from Poland, Chess lacks prejudice toward the blacks... and certainly does not allow the prejudice in the environment to blind him from the potential of the blues scene, which is achieving incredible popularity in 1940s-era Chicago. He opens a club in the colored side of town eventually featuring Muddy and Walter.

At the time, rock and roll is but a gleam in a few unknown musicians' eyes. Through a generous helping of Waters/Walter's and other artists' music—with a fair helping of poetic license—writer/director Darnell Martin tells the relatively unknown story of the headwaters of the river of modern blues and rock and roll. The acting is excellent, and, no doubt, Cadillac Records is Jeffrey Wright's magnum opus to this point. Most viewers will recognize him from roles where he plays "the intelligent black man," and in the movie *W*, he plays Colin Powell. From the extras on the DVD, one learns that Wright has spent many years, several on stage, honing his craft. And he's good, even great, as the inimitable Muddy. Particularly, he manages the voice well, which is a low, gravelly mumble... though often hard to make out if your air conditioning kicks in.

Young Muddy's music is appealing; he's mastered some guitar techniques that give his frets and strums a unique quality. Early on, Waters encounters the playing of Little Walter (Columbus Short), remarking that the guy plays the harmonica as no one else on heaven or earth. The film almost heads into buddy-movie territory, with Walter even

staying with Muddy and Muddy's girlfriend-then-wife Geneva Wade (Gabrielle Union). The actor playing Little Walter did win the Image Award for best supporting actor, and he does take some scenes, deservedly so if the actual Little Walter was that colorful and meteoric.

As historical drama, one has to give Cadillac Records kudos. I appreciate the set designs, the production designs, that so convincingly recreate 1940s and 1950s urban life. Watch the extras on the DVD to get a sense of the intensive work to get it exactly right; the lead designer comments, "Even if you find artifacts from that era, you have to realize that in the movie these items have to look brand new. A lot of restoration is required." Viewers who pay attention to such details will have a field day absorbing the wide variety of places these characters inhabit. I found the little tenement that Waters shared with Ms. Wade (and Mr. Walter, and Waters' offspring) reminiscent of the Kramdens' apartment in the 1950s television classic, *The Honeymooners*.

Another thing that strikes me is how rough the world of music was back in the day. Little Walter is always sporting a pistol in his belt, and doesn't seem reluctant to use it at the slightest provocation. Some of the scenes in Chess's club show real battles of the bands: not only do you, say, as a guitar player, walk up and do your riffs to blow your opponent off the stage musically, you can easily wind up in a brawl. When the singer Howlin' Wolf (Eamonn Walker) shows up, he's actually majorly scary—looks like a linebacker eyeing your quarterback. The sort of fellow you'd want on your side in any battle of the bands. Plus, as one might imagine, there's a ton of testosterone being flung this way and that. Floozies of the fairer gender abound as spoils.

General observations

If you've lived this long and never realized that rock and roll wasn't invented by white guys, then Cadillac Records can be a little jarring to your sense of order in the cosmos. I'm fairly comfortable seeing the roles of these poor and not-so-poor rhythm and blues musicians, mostly black and mostly from the South, especially when the music accompanies them. I kept listening to the sharps and flats of this vibrant environment, and how the music spread out and evolved... competitively. I'd say, "Okay, this one Muddy is playing has the rock 'n' roll sound, then this one, etc." None of the Muddy stuff would I call rock 'n' roll though.

Enter Chuck Berry (Mos Def). Very quickly, as he records *Maybelline* for the Chess Records label, I go, "Aha, now that's rock and roll." And so it was. From the Wikipedia article on Berry:

"According to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's website, 'While no individual can be said to have invented rock and roll, Chuck Berry comes the closest of any single figure to being the one who put all the essential pieces together.' Cub Koda wrote, 'Of all the early breakthrough rock & roll artists, none is more important to the development of the music than Chuck Berry. He is its greatest songwriter, the main shaper of its instrumental voice, one of its greatest guitarists, possessing the clearest diction, and one of its greatest performers.' John Lennon was more succinct: 'If you tried to give rock and roll another name, you might call it 'Chuck Berry'.'"

This part of the movie is one of the most exciting, primarily because Chuck himself is so cool (and Mos Def gives us a comic, entertaining rendition of the legend). It was with Berry's calculated merging of "hillbilly" and blues, his guitar virtuosity, and funloving

spirit that the music started crossing over into the white world and taking on the special qualities we know as rock 'n' roll. It also tended to bring whites and blacks together, dancing to the beat, in the same auditoriums. Which of course annoyed Southern racists and segregationists no end.

I like that the movie shows how rock 'n' roll fed readily into the movement for racial equality. They say music is the universal language, and for kids in the 50s and 60s, this adage appears to be true. Just as the Chuck Berry footage energized me, the subsequent rendering of the famed Etta James (At Last: the song that Obama and Ms. Obama danced to all night at the inauguration parties) tended to dampen my enthusiasm. Don't get me wrong, the lovely and talented Beyonce Knowles is more than adequate to the rather difficult role. But I was hoping the movie would wind up in the Berry direction.

So the elevation of Etta is a quibble I have. Also, I feel the movie, while we're clearly still in the 1950s, jumped forward to the Beach Boys era (mid-1960s) to make a point about plagiarism. Indeed, plagiarism seems tacked on in a rather awkward way—and it's clearly offensive what happened—but the plot would be better served if director/writer Martin simply acknowledged that most of the white r&r groups imitated the largely black creators. That being the most sincere form of flattery, not to mention enhancing the status of these creators in the musical world.

Academy Award-winning Adrien Brody (The Pianist, 2002) as Leonard Chess works well as a catalyst for what happens with the main characters and music on stage. [If you're looking for a special performance by Brody, I recommend Barry Levinson's Liberty Heights.]

Aside from some criticisms that the plot gets away sometimes from Ms. Martin, it's an entertaining and stimulating movie that may lead you to do some further research.

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