

behrcoll5@aol.com

Diesel falls 'Apart'

by Jackie Loohaus
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

It's a good thing for the makers of "A Man Apart" that Vin Diesel can always be counted on to inject some octane into a film.

Because Diesel is one of the few things that really plays in this movie, which has been held out of theatrical release for two years.

One might have hoped that Director F. Gary Gray had used that time wisely to adjust the picture.

Instead, Gray and his first-time screenwriters simply sat on a flawed project, one with a plot seen so often that audience members could have chanted it out together.

Tough, eccentric cop Sean Vetter (Diesel) does the right thing by busting a drug cartel kingpin named Lucero (Geno Silva). But Vetter pays for his devotion to duty when gunmen murder his beloved wife. The question is, who ordered the kill: Lucero or a mysterious new drug lord named El Diablo?

Another question is: Could the scriptwriters have come up with a lamer villain's name than "El Diablo"? Probably not, given the lack of imagination displayed in the rest of this screenplay.

Vetter teams up with Lucero to find (sigh) El Diablo, and finds himself battling not only vicious drug dealers but his own mental anguish. It's a race to see what will unravel first, Vetter's mental stability or the story.

Bet on Vetter. This plot has holes in it you could drive a Hummer through, but Diesel soldiers on trying to hold it all together.

The most watchable action-star to come along in years, he combines muscular good looks with edgy humor



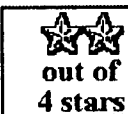
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Vin Diesel and Larenz Tate dish-out justice, execution-style.

and brings the movie the only air of street-smart believability it can boast.

Cinematographer Jack N. Green does give "A Man Apart" an interesting look, gray and grimy as the inside of an old warehouse. And Gray provides the requisite number of shootouts and car crashes to keep action fans happy.

But the movie is overlong, filled with so much narration and explanatory datelines ("Baja, Mexico") that it begins to feel like a travelogue. The soft ending has the scent of an afterthought.

In short, this is a production yearning for DVD release. And we can bet it won't take two years to happen.



"A Man Apart" directed by F. Gary Gray, starring Vin Diesel and Larenz Tate is now playing at Tinseltown.

Grateful Dead lyricist forges out on his own

by Greg Kot
Chicago Tribune

Few major bands have divided listeners as decisively as the Grateful Dead once did. The San Francisco pranksters attracted a legion of rabid followers and repelled just about everybody else who didn't have the patience to plumb the intricacies of their one-of-a-kind sound: country, folk, blues and rock as viewed through the kaleidoscope of psychedelia.

Their style favored lengthy jams and winding improvisation, but underneath the noodling was a sturdy foundation: melodic songs, usually with lyrics written by Robert Hunter. Though not a band member, Hunter was Dead patriarch Jerry Garcia's closest musical collaborator and friend. Hunter's often profound words gave the Dead's tunes a depth that eluded even the most ambitious rock bands. Alongside such '60s icons as Bob Dylan, Pete Townshend, Lou Reed and a handful of others, Hunter opened a new world for rock lyricism with his surreal wordplay, evocative imagery and cosmic Beat-inspired poetry.

The songs he wrote with and for the Dead—"Dark Star," "Uncle John's Band," "Ripple," "Bertha," "Casey Jones," "China Cat Sunflower," "U.S. Blues," the epic "Terrapin Station," "Touch of Grey"—are the foundation of the band's legacy.

That legacy lives on, even after Garcia's death in 1995. The survivors have regrouped as the Dead, and will tour this summer. Meanwhile, Hunter has forged a solo career. In an interview from the road, the guitar-playing troubadour assessed the state of his world, and ours:

Guitar playing: "I practice two to four hours a day, and my fingers are obeying me at long last. I started at 15 which makes 45-plus years of practice. I figure I'm a late bloomer. I've been driving across the country listening to Miles Davis and John Coltrane. I could never borrow from them, but the freedom with which they approach their instruments is sinking in. They're giving me permission to go ahead and just open it up. The other night I discovered three new melodic possibilities in 'Reuben and Cerise,' just letting my fingers go where they wanna go."

Touring during wartime: "There is a fear, a nervousness about us congregating. But I feel we need to be out there. It's important to be out there. There's nothing more important than to be playing music in these dangerous days. I guess my statement, to be quite hippie dippy about it, is that we are all one, and half of me is beating the hell out of the other half of me. I have not turned on the television once. I did that during the last war, and wrote a book about it ('A Strange Music'). From what I read and what I hear about this one, it's the same war."

Protest songs: "I usually start my sets with 'Standing on the Moon,' which I wrote around the time of the (1991 Persian) last Gulf war: 'I see a shadow on the sun/Standing on the moon/The stars go fading one by one/I hear a cry of victory/And another of defeat/A scrap of age old lullaby/Down some forgotten street.' That just addresses it. I can pour all my feelings into that."

The Internet: "If music is free, less crap will be made. I hope it will become less market-oriented, where music will make it on its individual merits rather than its commercial push. This could auger augur a golden era for music. But it will kill the record companies, and I'm delighted to see them crumble."

The Dead without Garcia: "When I was writing songs for him, I was writing songs that he could wrap his mind around. They weren't just a bunch of wild turkeys. Now there is a weeding-out process of songs of mine the band can and can't handle. I'm doing a lot of the things they're not doing, like 'Days Between' or 'Candyman,' real lyric-heavy songs. Vocally, the Dead aren't as strong as they might be, so they're going to take Joan Osborne out on the summer tour. She can add to them. The new band is about as close as we're going to get to what it was without Jerry's sweet melodic guitar thing behind it."

Writing with Garcia: "Telepathy? There was a lot of unspoken communication. But for (the Dead's classic 1970 album) 'Workingman's Dead,' we were living in the same house, and I was banging away on guitar, writing songs like 'Dire Wolf' upstairs. By the time I'd give him the lyrics, he'd already thought of a better approach to the melody. That wasn't exactly telepathy. It was more like thin walls."

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