

Art and swinishness considered, weakly

Sweet and Lowdown, written and directed by Woody Allen

By David Walsh
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Woody Allen's new film recounts a few years in the life of fictional jazz guitarist Emmet Ray during the 1930s. Ray (Sean Penn) is an extraordinary musician—intimidated only by the music and reputation of the legendary Django Reinhardt—but something of a lowlife. He pimps, hustles in pool halls, sits in rail yards and watches trains and shoots rats for fun. He falls in with a mute laundress, Hattie (Samantha Morton), but, not knowing what he has, walks out on her. He takes up with a socialite, Blanche (Uma Thurman), and marries her, to their mutual unhappiness. In the end, he comes back for Hattie, only to discover that she's married.

Until this time, Emmet has kept his emotions to himself. Now the floodgates burst and he recognizes what a terrible mistake he's made. The result of this emotional breakthrough is the best music of his career, according to the “experts” (Allen, jazz critic Nat Hentoff and others) whose comments are interspersed throughout the film.

Allen has returned to one of his favorite themes, the relationship between personal failings and artistic achievement. Ray is a swine at all times except when he's playing the guitar. Then he becomes a different man; apparently all that's best in him emerges. Does his swinishness contribute to his playing or at least not detract from it? If a spectator were to leave half or two-thirds of the way through the film, he or she might well have been given the impression that this was so. Such a spectator might be forgiven for considering the film an exercise in self-justification, given Allen's well-known personal difficulties.

In the last 10 minutes, the film rather perfunctorily and dissatisfyingly reveals that Ray's coldness has, in fact, always held him back from greatness. Aside from the fact, however, that we are consistently *told* of his

inferiority to Reinhardt, there has been nothing to indicate any weakness in Ray's manner of playing. On the contrary, he consistently bowls everyone over. Nor is there any effort to demonstrate which qualities in his last recordings raise them to a higher level. I doubt therefore that the film is likely to convince anyone that selfishness in the artist is a serious drawback, or indeed much of a concern.

Sweet and Lowdown is a terribly flat work. What often happens these days is that performers, saddled with essentially inert material, overexert themselves in an effort to generate some excitement on screen. It is a tribute to Penn's natural artistic delicacy that he remains dignified and restrained, given such a poor, cliched script. Samantha Morton, another fine performer, also survives intact. This leaves much of the obvious dreadfulness concentrated in the performance of Uma Thurman, probably a talented actress, but one in need of a better screenplay and better direction.

Allen has always been too self-involved to have much feeling for history. He has chosen, for example, not to give race a prominent place in this film, which is probably all to the good, but the thoroughly harmonious world he's created seems a bit too good to be true. (A white musician backing a black singer before a well-dressed black audience in a Hollywood short subject in the mid-1930s?) Considering the immense pressures of the day, were there no issues between black and white musicians, even to those for whom skin color was appropriately insignificant?

More generally, Allen has chosen to make a film about jazz and the Depression era virtually without addressing any of the specific circumstances attached to either subject. This is a film that's “timeless” in the weakest sense; there is no effort to connect the protagonists' behavior with the world that produced and

is continually reproducing it. Is it possible that the legendary “misbehavior” of jazz musicians had something to do with the fact that these immensely gifted artists were left to the tender mercies of the American commercial marketplace, where poverty, lack of respect, the insensitivity and mistreatment (or worse) of clubowners, record labels and such, and in the case of black musicians, racial discrimination, destroyed so many? There's no excuse for this being a closed book to a film director, particularly one with a knowledge of jazz history.

In the only scene that bears on his childhood, Ray describes verbal and physical abuse by his father. Child abuse has become a sort of psychological catch-all, a truism, which, in the hands of American movie and television writers and directors, is largely a substitute for any attempt to make *concrete* sense of people's unhappiness. (Allen's only innovation is to project this process back into history.) After all, this well-off layer reasons, in this best of all possible worlds, how could there be anything fundamentally wrong with the way life is organized?

There is something wasteful about this entire project. Aside from the squandering of Penn and Morton in such undeveloped roles, there is the odd use of Anthony LaPaglia in a part that hardly requires him to work up a sweat. And why introduce John Waters for thirty seconds? Perhaps, unhappily, self-importance comes into play. There seems no other way to explain the decision to employ the talents of Zhao Fei, cinematographer on *Raise the Red Lantern*, among other films, on such a slight work.

Woody Allen has averaged nearly a film a year for the past three decades. Few probably have exceeded his output of feature films over that period. He has sustained this level of activity through shrewd and relatively economical methods of work, appealing to a certain segment of the population and carving out a niche for himself in the international film industry. And certainly he has contributed, along the way, some remarkable moments. There is something to *Annie Hall* (1977), at least the performance of Diane Keaton. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) was one of the finest Reagan-era films. There are a number of memorable performances by Mia Farrow. *Husbands and Wives* (1992) has its moments, including intimations of self-criticism, and *Celebrity* (1998) managed to step on

some of the right toes.

Overall, however, Allen seems too easy on himself, too willing to avert his eyes from the more troubling aspects of life and history. Occasionally one catches glimpses of a tougher, more critical artistic personality, but such glimpses are rare. He may very well feel that in the course of nearly 30 films he has managed to capture his particular social milieu, has pinned it like a butterfly, but the opposite is more likely to be the case: that Allen is the relatively tame captive of a milieu whose *raison d'être*, it sometimes seems, is taking the line of least resistance.

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