

Notorious Pinpoints Themes That Resonate In The Lives Of Many



Jamal Woolard plays the starring role as Notorious B.I.G. Staff Photo/Jior Cameron.



The corner of Fulton and James. Now a pharmacy, the former liquor storefront was where Biggie used to hustle. Staff Photo/Jior Cameron.



Angela Basset, who plays Biggie's mother, and Biggie's birth mother Voletta Wallace. Staff Photo/Jior Cameron.

By Jior Cameron
The Seattle Medium

Christopher Wallace. Biggie Smalls. The Notorious B.I.G. These are all names synonymous with one of the most influential, well-respected, and dynamic figures in hip-hop history. Born in one of the toughest and most poverty stricken neighborhoods of New York — Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn — Christopher Wallace lived the hard-knock life that was more the norm in his community than the exception.

Wallace was raised by a single mother from Jamaica; and early-on he succumbed to the pressures of the streets while

trying to stay afloat in the midst of poverty. By the age of 17, Wallace was a high school dropout, teenage father, and a street hustler in an increasingly prevalent drug game.

The biopic NOTORIOUS, details the life of Christopher Wallace — the son, Biggie Smalls — the impresario behind Junior M.A.F.I.A. and Notorious B.I.G. — the bigger than life lyricist and rapper that left a lasting impact on hip-hop. NOTORIOUS illustrates Biggie's rise to stardom, and details the life and struggles of a man who went from being just the norm to an exception.

The movie, directed by George Tillman, Jr. (Soul Food), features a cast of both well known actors and newcomers alike. While the cast is star studded (Angela Basset, Derek Luke, Anthony Mackie), perhaps the most surprising aspect of the movie was how well many of the new-comers played their respective characters. Namely Jamal Woolard in the starring role as "Biggie".

Woolard gave a stunning performance, seemingly concealing the casting problems Tillman experienced in trying to fill the lead role.

"We had guys who could act, but didn't necessarily look the part," said Tillman, as he recounted his difficulties casting the individual to play this monumental role.

"So many young men came, from a 14-year-old to a 44-year-old," recalled Biggie's mother Voletta Wallace. "I saw some good performers, but none reminded me of my son."

"We weren't looking for someone who was doing a great imitation. We were looking for someone who could cut to the essence of his complexity, and that was a lot more difficult to

find," said casting director Tracy Bird.

They would later find the person they were looking for in Woolard. As soon as Woolard stepped into the casting room, he made an immediate impression on the directors, and most importantly, on Biggie's mother.

"Jamal walked in and Ms. Wallace said, 'that's my son,'" recalled Tillman.

"Jamal came in looking like Christopher, sounding like my son, and had the right attitude," said Wallace.

A Brooklyn-born rapper himself, Woolard had the lyrical skill set to sell the rapper side of Biggie to audiences, but he had zero acting experience. Yet even with no prior acting experience, Tillman, Wallace and the other producers saw something special in Woolard. He had *swagger*—the almost extreme self-confidence that most chart-topping artists in hip-hop possess. A trait that these days is almost a prerequisite for success in the industry.

"You can't buy swagger, that's a Brooklyn thing," said Woolard. "You got to be born with swagger. I'm just a regular person making it happen."

Moved by his persona and resemblance to Biggie, the directors decided to take a chance on the unknown talent.

Fully understanding that he had gotten an exceptional opportunity and perhaps the role of a lifetime, Woolard threw himself into his preparation. Woolard studied Biggie—*really* studied him. He put himself through a self-proclaimed "Biggie Bootcamp." He gained over 50 pounds, going from 285 lbs to 340 lbs, worked intensely with an acting coach, and

watched countless video footage of the late rapper.

"Right away he took the responsibility of playing Biggie very seriously," said Byrd. "Just like Jamie Foxx was Ray Charles, Jamal was Biggie."

Woolard studied everything from Biggie's mannerisms to his cadence and inflection, to his vocal tone and breathing pattern, to how he held his head when speaking to certain people.

"Biggie held his head up when talking to Puff (P. Diddy) because he looked up to him; and he looked down his head at [Lil'] Kim. He never asked, he always ordered, his chin was always up, looking forward," Woolard recalled.

Woolard's preparation paid off, as his portrayal of Biggie is uncanny. From Biggie the rapper to Christopher Wallace the man, Woolard is spot-on.

Tillman agrees. "You would be in the middle of directing a scene, look over and swear you were looking at Biggie," he said.

Fantastic renderings of characters aside, the movie also gives viewers a glimpse into something people outside of Biggie's family and inner circle weren't privy to—the man behind the music. The film details the circumstances that transformed Biggie from a shy kid sitting on the stoop, to the money making whatever-it-takes drug dealer who would sell to a pregnant mother, to the sometimes brash and magnetic rapper. The audience is invited to gain a greater understanding of both Biggie the rapper and Christopher Wallace the person, his loves, losses, triumphs, and ultimately his tragedy.

Set to the music that made

Biggie famous, NOTORIOUS is far from a typical hip-hop movie. Unlike many films of its genre, both the characters and story-line run the gamut of emotion.

"When people look at hip-hop films, they might think of something that's all about music and something that's not really sophisticated. But this story is so much more," said Tillman.

Keeping with his vision, Tillman covers many transformational events that took place in Biggie's life. One such event being the infamous East Coast/West Coast feud between Biggie and fellow rapper Tupac Shakur. The film explores the turn of events that would ultimately bring both rappers to their demise, with both a historical account and sensitivity that sheds light on the events that many simply wrote off as mere gang violence or just another Black on Black crime.

"For me it was really important that NOTORIOUS become one of the first films that deals with African American characters that are dramatic, serious, and have a wide range of emotions that resonate beyond that world," said Tillman.

Through exploring the life and circumstances of one individual, NOTORIOUS pinpoints themes that resonate in many lives—coming-of-age, struggle, and realizing dreams. The film is a touching, informative, and fresh perspective on Notorious B.I.G., Biggie Smalls, and most importantly Christopher Wallace—the man behind the music.

NOTORIOUS opens in theatres nationwide this weekend.

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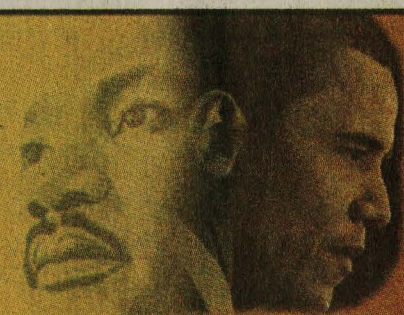
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