

Interviews: Ice Cube, Rob Riggle Discover ‘21 Jump Street’

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CHICAGO – A good comedy film lives and breathes through the right casting of character roles. In the new film “21 Jump Street,” Ice Cube is the angry police captain who guides his undercover recruits Jonah Hill and Channing Tatum as they infiltrate high school. Rob Riggle pitches in as a wacky high school coach.

Both supporting players were in Chicago a couple weeks ago, promoting their new film, and HollywoodChicago.com got to sit in on a press roundtable. “21 Jump Street” is loosely based on the 1987 TV show, and besides the buddy picture antics of Hill and Tatum, there are also the familiar comic stylings of Chris Parnell and Ellie Kemper (“Bridesmaids”).

★ Ice Cube, Captain Dickson in “21 Jump Street”

Ice Cube is the stage name for O’Shea Jackson, and he began as his career in hip-hop, but expanded in show business to include acting (“Boyz ‘n the Hood”), screenwriting (“Friday”) and producing (the TV version of the film “Are We There Yet?”). He started his music career in the 1980s, with the groundbreaking hip-hop groups C.I.A. and N.W.A. Management issues had him breaking with N.W.A in the early 1990s, and from there he embarked on a successful solo music and movie career. He continues to be a force in entertainment on several platforms.



Back to School: Ice Cube Guides Jonah Hill and Channing Tatum in ‘21 Jump Street’
Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

Question: Were you a fan of the original series, ‘21 Jump Street’?

Ice Cube: Yeah, it was a hot show at the time. I liked Holly Robinson on the show. I wasn’t a superfan, but I caught an episode or two.

Question: Were you surprised they went with a comedic route for the film?

Ice Cube: No, actually I was glad. It would have been much harder to play out as a drama. It would have to be like “Traffic” or something.

[laughs] It was damn near a spoof of the show, as we were telling the audience the whole time that Hollywood has run out of ideas. You're stuck with it, we're stuck with it, so let's have a good time. It's that 'wink-wink,' bring the audience along for the ride, that's the way to do it. This is light years away from the TV show, and most people don't know it anyway, and don't care. Most people want to see a funny film, and we deliver I believe.

Question: What do you think of all the Hollywood remakes?

Ice Cube: I know why they do it, it might be a hit. When my son was little, he loved Thomas the Tank Engine. We had all that around the house. He grows up, and we threw it all away. Then my other son comes along and he likes Thomas the Tank Engine again! I was like why didn't we keep it? Stories that work for one generation, might work for another.

Question: How have you evolved as a songwriter? What do you think about today that you never would have thought about in the 1980s and '90s and how do you interpret that into you current songwriting?

Ice Cube: I just think about the things that irritate me, all aspects of life. When I started out, I was just worried about what was happening in the 'hood and less what was happening outside of there. But now I think I want to talk about it all. I always said that what I do is street knowledge, you let the street know what the politicians of today are doing, and if the politicians are listening, let them know what the streets think. Hopefully that gets the mess worked out.

That's always been my approach, to expose what's going on and what's not being said. I could go the selfish route, and probably make a whole lot more money, but that's not what it's about, it's about speaking for people who can't speak for themselves. I do in music, it's harder to do in movies.

Question: In the music realm, what are you working on now?

Ice Cube: I am working on a record – I still say record, excuse me [laughs] – a digital download that will be out in July. It's what I love. I'm still fooling around with it so I don't want to say the title in case I change it.

Question: Given the recent school shootings in Cleveland, and the fact you are quoted in the movie with 'embrace your stereotypes,' what is your take on that situation as it did involve the different stereotypes and cliques in high school?



Ice Cube Chilling in Chicago, February 29th, 2012
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Ice Cube: It's two different things, obviously. I have making commentary about it for a long time. Movies like 'Friday,' where the bully finally gets it, and everybody liked that. Bullying is also institutionalized in America, with even hazing is being a form of it, just a mob mentality.

'Embrace your stereotypes' means embrace what makes up you. Some stereotypes are true – I love chicken, but that's a stereotype, I love f**king basketball, but that's a stereotype, too. But who cares? Embrace it. Be who you are, and don't be ashamed of what that is.

Question: Speaking of which, how did you avoid the stereotypes of hip-hop and gangsta rap?

Ice Cube: Not buying into it, not buying into the life. It's an illusion. The party has to end. If it never ended, you'd hate partying. I kept my eyes on the prize, my work was my hobby. I love what I do, and I have fun, so that's where I focus my energy.

Question: You also just mentioned the film 'Friday.' Is there another sequel in the works?

Ice Cube: I just signed a deal with New Line Cinema to write the next one. It will be called 'Last Friday.' Then the one after that will be called, 'Friday After Last.' We've got to keep this thing going. [laughs]

Question: Are you a Clippers or Lakers fan?

Ice Cube: Why do you even have to ask that question? [laughs] The Lakers are the Yankees, the Clippers are the Mets.

Question: What's coming up for you, besides the music?

Ice Cube: I'm doing a couple more Coors Light commercial, one will debut during the NBA Playoffs. I'm also putting together an N.W.A. movie, the script is good and the director has been hired.

Question: So you're going to have actors playing you guys when you were younger?

Ice Cube: Yes.

Question: It's been known that you've had your issues with N.W.A. Has that been all worked out?

Ice Cube: Yeah, it's been long solved. I still don't like Jerry Heller [N.W.A. manager]. What's to like about him? [laughs] I think the dude came in, and I'm not saying that Easy-E is not a big boy, but before Jerry Heller Easy didn't know the music business. After Jerry came in, not only did he learn everything but learned the shady, old-school music business, which I thought had played on in our generation. I thought that was over, until I met Jerry Heller.

Question: You were in the film 'Rampart' recently, and your character seemed almost like a paranoid delusion of Woody Harrelson's character. Was that the intention? I thought the character got weirder and weirder as the film went on.

Ice Cube: Me too. It was like, what the hell is this? All my scenes were cut, and it turned out to be like a bad mixed drink. Good idea, good ingredients, but the final taste was bad. I love Oren [Moverman, the director], but he left the film on the cutting room floor. I would love to see the film I signed up for.



Rob Riggle, Coach Walters in "21 Jump Street"

Rob Riggle has steered his life in opposite directions, but has been successful on both roads. Shortly after high school, he joined the Marine Corp, intending to be a Naval Aviator. In that capacity he has served in Liberia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. He left the military to pursue his comedy career, but remained in the reserves, and is currently a Lieutenant Colonel. He partnered in comedy with Rob Huebel at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theater in New York City, and took his offbeat comic authority figures to both "Saturday Night Live" and "The Daily Show." Recently, he's appeared in character roles in "Larry Crowne" and "Big Miracle."



Odd Rob Riggle Turns on the Funny in '21 Jump Street'
Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

Question: You proved in the final scenes of '21 Jump Street' that you're willing to do anything in the name of comedy. What frontier do you think is still uncrossed in your pursuit of the elusive laugh?

Rob Riggle: I don't know if there is right now, but that's not to say there won't be, I'm sure we'll come up with something. Comedy – go big or stay home. [laughs] Go for it. And that part wasn't scripted.

Question: You've established a pretty good character actor career in films. Is that your niche or do you want to do a lead role someday?

Riggle: I would love a shot at a lead role, but it's not up to me right now. I just try to make the most out of every opportunity I'm given, and hope somebody will get on my side. Until that happens, I'm just a working actor. If it's something I think I can contribute to, they I'll jump on it.

Question: Did you watch the original '21 Jump Street' TV series?

Riggle: I wasn't a hardcore follower, but I was aware of the show, and watched several episodes. I did think it was original, young looking cops going back to high school, I remember having an appreciation for it.

Question: As a Marine Corp veteran who has actually experienced some overseas duty, what advantage does it give your perspective on both comedy and American life? Do you keep those lives separate?

Riggle: I do keep the two worlds separate. I'm a Lieutenant Colonel, I don't want my Marines to ever think that I don't take their work and lives seriously. But at the same time, that's my Marine life. My comedy life and my acting life, forget about it, let's go out and have some fun.

I do draw from the military experiences that I've had. I've worked in refugee camps in Albania, I've protected the embassy in Liberia and I've worked with the northern alliance in Afghanistan. I've seen real life experience and I draw upon it, especially the comedy game of 'arrogant ignorance' – large and in charge, but totally screwed up. I do that character a lot. I've seen a lot of things, and I wouldn't trade a minute of it.

Question: So is commentary on your military career 'hands-off' in comedy?

Riggle: I don't believe in that, in comedy I don't think anything is hands off, especially if it's done right. That's my criteria, just if it's funny and done right.

Question: You've seemed to have established a niche playing establishment types who have gone insane or sociopathic. What do you find funny about this type of guy and do you think it's closer to the truth than fiction?



Rob Riggle in Chicago, February 29th, 2012
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Riggle: [Laughs] Like I said, it's my favorite comedy game to play. What makes me laugh is the authority figure, the 'arrogant ignorant' cop, the coach, the general, the CEO or whatever alpha person is out there, the guy who is always saying 'I've got this.' No you don't. Not only do they usually not have it, but they often go in the opposite direction. I think there's joy in that, I think there is funny in that, and it's something I like to do.

Question: Where do you stand on the complaint about too many remakes in Hollywood, and where does '21 Jump Street' fit in regarding that?

Riggle: The complaint is legitimate. But I think Jump Street is the exception, it was a wonderful job of the balancing act between the old TV show and creating something new. It's a stand alone film, and in that sense we did a good job.

Question: How was it interacting with Jonah Hill and Channing Tatum?

Riggle: Jonah and I did a small bit in a show called 'Campus Ladies' in 2005, so I've known him for awhile. He's a very funny guy, a great improviser and he didn't disappoint me in this film. He gave me a lot of freedom to play. Channing I had never met until this film, and I was really happy about the way that went with him. He knew comedy, he knew his way around a bit and had good ideas. We had fun on and off camera.

Question: Since comedy has gotten more and more extreme, do you foresee a point where the line can be drawn on that type of comedy?

Riggle: Yeah, you can draw a line everywhere on anything. And it starts when you get a diminishing return. But if you get a return on the investment, you're going to stay with it. That's probably the only criteria on the line. We basically try to make each other laugh.

Question: Which film in cinema history, either as a lead role or as part of the ensemble, would you have liked to appeared in and why?

Riggle: ‘Caddyshack’ is one of my favorite movies of all time, it’s one i grew up on, the one I watch over and over and never get tired of it. I would have been really happy to have been part of that. There was something special about that one. The wheels on my bus are George Carlin albums, Eddie Murphy’s ‘Delirious,’ ‘Animal House’ and ‘Caddyshack.’

“21 Jump Street” opens everywhere on March 16th. Featuring Jonah Hill, Channing Tatum, Ice Cube, Rob Riggle, Ellie Kemper and Chris Parnell. Screenplay by Michael Bacall and Jonah Hill. Directed by Phil Lord and Chris Miller. Rated “R”



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