

## Director Mario Van Peebles Orchestrates ‘We the Party’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on April 6, 2012 - 4:33pm

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Mario Van Peebles is a second generation filmmaker, following the footsteps of his revolutionary director father, Melvin Van Peebles. In keeping with the family business, Mario has included his children in his latest film, “We the Party,” a high school movie about this particular time in history for youth and their culture, and the impact this era has on them.

Highly stylized and voyeuristic, this film succeeds as a hopeful view of Los Angeles high school hijinks, updated for the mix of cultures that is the experience of the City of Angels. Where it is less successful is in the sermonizing, which doesn’t flow as naturally as the kids being kids. There is a moral to the story, but that morality is laced with sticky plot points that might play better for adults, but doesn’t gibe as organically in relationship to a younger perspective.

“We the Party” is about a group of high school friends who are living and learning during the second decade of the 21st century. Fictional Baldwin Hills High School is the setting for a mix of African-American, Hispanic and Caucasian youth. They’ve mastered the technology and knowledge that is available to them in the modern age, and are leading a revolution of the mind with the help of their teacher, Mr. Sutton (Mario Van Peebles).



Family Affair: Mandela Van Peebles (Hendrix) is Directed by Dad Mario (Mr. Sutton) in ‘We the Party’  
*Photo credit: XL-rator Media*

Hendrix (Mandela Van Peebles) is the 16 year-old son of Mr. Sutton, and he has set his sights on Cheyenne (Simone Battle), a super-student whose father happens to be a policeman, Officer Davis (Michael Jai White). Between the antics of his friends, Hendrix has to learn the meaning of empathy, as one of his classmates C.C.(Rapper YG) struggles with petty crime and a gang related brother (Snoop Dogg). Meanwhile, an epic party is about to begin, and Hendrix thinks with the combination of hot rappers, music executives, his classmates and even C.C., this could be the way to Cheyenne’s heart.

Mario Van Peebles uses many shadings of a director’s palette to communicate the action in the film. Most effective is the multi-view, a splitting of the full screen into quadrants, showing many actions happening at the same time. It was a technique most famously used in “The Thomas Crown Affair,” and to use it in a coming-of-age film adds pop and a meaningful energy. Extreme close-ups and other odd angles also come off as fresh, especially when expressing the antics of a hot party. Van Peebles puts a unique stamp in promoting this style, and expands his evolution as a longtime director.

This is a family affair, as two of Van Peeble’s children make an appearance in notable roles (even his famous father has a cameo) and Mandela is a comfortable fit in his role as Hendrix, combining the pent-up enthusiasm of youth with the need to make something of himself, for both his concerned parents and the wider world. The other Van Peebles rise and fall according to the level of their roles, it might have been more conducive in some instances to cast outside the family, but how does anyone learn the family business otherwise?

The toughest sell in the film is the “life lessons.” There is a new age philosophy in this high school, presumably post Obama, that being smart is the new gangsta. This is a beautiful hope, but it just doesn’t fit when shoehorned into the already crowded narrative. It basically comes down to Hendrix versus C.C., as each have an opportunity to influence the other’s direction. This culminates in a misunderstanding with the nuance of a low-end sitcom, and about as effective. Mario Van Peebles works hard in his script to modernize high school with honest depictions of drug use, rap culture and even nudity, and then trips himself up with a climax that doesn’t serve that reality.



West Coast Rapper YG Portrays C.C. in ‘We the Party’  
Photo credit: XL-rator Media

Young people who are on the path to the “new gangsta” philosophy will love this film, it lionizes their efforts, and still shows them in a light that likes to party, interrelate and push all the buttons of new tech. But there also is a reliance on “types” – the gay student, the handicapped girl, the fast talking con artist and the thug – which distracts from the philosophy rather than adds to it, and becomes the narrative equivalent of an ill-fitting suit.

What remains fun about the proceedings is what is always fun about high school, if lucky enough to experience it – the friends, the parties, the prom and hanging out. Mixing this typical stuff with a philosophy of high achievement is impossible to criticize, and it is admirable that Mario Van Peebles wants this world and attitude for the sake of the future.

*“We the Party” has a limited release on April 6th, including Chicago. Check local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Mario Van Peebles, Mandela Van Peebles, Maya Van Peebles, YG, Simone Battle, Michael Jai White and Snoop Dogg. Written and directed by Mario Van Peebles. Rated “R”*



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