

## ‘Sparkle’ is Dull for Whitney Houston Swan Song

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Given the shocking circumstances of Whitney Houston’s passing, it is a bit disconcerting to see her vibrantly alive again in the new film “Sparkle.” However, if she was still with us, this trifling and dull film would soon be forgotten. Jordan Sparks, Derek Luke and Carmen Ejogo co-star.

It is unfortunate that this will be Houston’s last public work, because “Sparkle” never really shines. The characters go through the standard mode kids-let’s-put-on-a-show, with standard obstacles like religion, household rules and unmotivated push back from negative people – including Houston’s role. There are some dramatic musical numbers, but they are expressed mostly as set pieces rather than memorable tunes. There is a lot of sincerity in the performances and overall production, yet sincerity cannot overcome the drawback of a dishwater story.

It’s 1968 Detroit, and three sisters are in or on the verge of adulthood, and are living in the home of their mother Emma (Whitney Houston). The oldest, nicknamed Sister (Carmen Ejogo), is the prodigal daughter, having come home after a failed attempt as a singer. Dolores (Tiki Sumpter) is soon off to medical school. The youngest is named Sparkle (Jordin Sparks), and her dreams are of music, as she constantly writes songs in her journal.



Sparkle (Jordin Sparks) and her Mother Emma (Whitney Houston) in ‘Sparkle’  
*Photo credit: Alicia Gbur for TriStar Pictures*

There is a family friend named Stix (Derek Luke), who sees the potential in both forming the sisters as a girl group and Sparkle’s songs. The girls rise through the Detroit music scene, drawing interest from both Motown records and major labels. This goes on without the knowledge of Emma, whose religious insistence and household rules run counter to the ambitions of the group. When an oily comedian named Satin (Mike Epps) starts courting Sister, their coupling begins a cycle of downfall for the fledgling singing act.

The soap opera of the family gets in the way of what potentially could have been about the most interesting story – the music scene of 1968 Detroit. “Sparkle” is a remake of a 1970s cult movie, but the setting of the original was moved from the 1950s Harlem to the ‘60s Detroit. Nothing about this atmosphere is exploited, except for glancing references to the 1967 Detroit race riots and Martin Luther King. The time is 1968, but somehow the King assassination in April of that year never plays a role in the power keg of the Motor City, or the African American characters in the film? That misstep takes away a lot of narrative potential.

Four of the songs from the original movie are remade for this version, with additional contributions from R. Kelly. Whitney Houston sings a standard gospel song – “His Eye Is on the Sparrow” – with her trademark verve. However, none of the songs are memorable or hummable, and are often hindered by the splashier production techniques of the digital age. Again, nothing against the sincerity of the singers and the cast, but the songs don’t pop out of the screen as much as they just seem perfunctory. Two highlights are the girl group and their movement choreography – which outshines the tunes that they’re singing – and Jordin Sparks, who has tremendous stage presence and delivery.

The character motivations are unnatural as well, and blow in any direction the screenplay sends them. The role of the comedian named Satin could have represented much more – it is established that he works against the black community in Detroit – but that storyline is forgotten as he has to get angry at Sister because her career takes off. This is the weakest part of the overall narrative, and takes up a lot of screen time. It also propels all of the cast to the resolution, which for mother Emma is opposite to what she had been preaching all along.



The Title Character Strikes a Luxurious Pose in “Sparkle”  
Photo credit: Alicia Gbur for TriStar Pictures

Every hindrance seen in show business movies – bad marriages, drugs, jealousy, unchecked rage, naysayers – appears in “Sparkle,” but the reasoning behind it is either not present or presented in shorthand. This is a perfect example of putting too much conflict into the stew of the story, having it over-spice all of the ingredients and ruining the overall taste. It would seem like African American entertainers in 1968 Detroit would be enough to riff on, without the cause-and-effect emoting that could have been in any era.

It is likely that Whitney Houston will be most remembered for her earlier works, the soaring voice and her own “sparkle” in the 1980s and ‘90s. In this “Sparkle,” her role and the story are just too bland for this extraordinary legacy.

*“Sparkle,” opens everywhere on August 17th. Featuring Jordin Sparks, Whitney Houston, Derek Luke, Mike Epps, Carmen Ejogo, Tika Sumpter, Omari Hardwick and Cee Lo Green. Screenplay by Mara Brock Akil. Directed by Salim Akil. Rated “PG-13”*



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