# ‘The Sapphires’ Don’t Fit Inside its 1960s Setting

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – “The Sapphires” is inspired by a true story, about an Australian girl group who entertains the troops in 1968 Viet Nam. There is little feeling regarding the era the film is portraying, and it’s essentially used as a vehicle for period pop songs that have been heard before.

The attempt to create some heat in the film is sincere, including the addition of comic actor Chris O’Dowd (the cop in “Bridesmaids), but the presentation is hampered by the obvious lack of experience in the actresses portraying the girl group and the budgetary limitations of recreating the 1960s, including Viet Nam. There is no big moment in the film that seems honest, it’s just a backstage story of group-comes-together, group-goes-through-trials and group-wows-the-naysayers. There is a barely explored subplot involving racism issues in 1960s Australian, and calculated romance, but none of those themes are enough to propel the film, and the overall result is more flat line than a back beat.

The films begins in late 1950s Australian, in a rural area of the continent. Four little girls are entertaining the locals, when government vehicles intervene. This is the time of the “stolen generation,” when light-skinned Aborigines (native Australians) were taken from their darker skinned families to be assimilated into the imported white culture there. One of the girl singers is taken, and that becomes significant ten years later.



Gail (Deborah Mailman), Julie (Jessica Mauboy), Cynthia (Miranda Tapsell) and Kay (Shari Sebbens) are ‘The Sapphires’
*Photo credit: The Weinstein Company*

After that decade goes by, three of the “darker” Aborigine girls have grown up in that rural town, Gail (Deborah Mailman), Cynthia (Miranda Tapsell) and headstrong Julie (Jessica Mauboy). Gail and Cynthia head to town to participate in a talent show, joined by a defiant Julie against her family’s wishes. The three are discovered there by Dave (Chris O’Dowd), an Irish musician, who offers to manage them, as long as they switch the primary music in their act from country to soul. The gang also recruits stolen cousin Kay (Shari Sebbens) to complete the quartet, now dubbed “The Sapphires.” Dave gets the group a gig entertaining the troops in Viet Nam, as sort of an Australian version of The Supremes.

There is a lot going on, almost too much, and the “stolen generation” subplot feels wedged in against the larger backstage story of simply the girls as entertainers. This is an adaptation of a stage play, and maybe was more comfortable in the fantasy environment on stage, rather than having to recreate in cinematic terms the time and place in the late 1960s. The period becomes a shorthand, with scenes (for example) of Martin Luther King’s assassination – which had implications in the black versus white thesis, but didn’t really fit with an Australian story – and of course actually going to Viet Nam. It all had a sense of being just thrown in against the story of the singers, without creating an emotional attachment to the era.

The music choices don’t help. The songs were a showcase for the vocal talents of the quartet – lead singer Julie is portrayed in her film debut by “Australian Idol” runner up Jessica Mauboy – but instead of being uplifting it had the been-there-done-that element of overdone pop rock. Standards like “I Heard it Through the Grapevine,” “I’ll Take You There” and “I Can’t Help Myself” have been played out elsewhere, and better. There is actually a snippet of a country song at the talent show and a vocal-only version of the folk song “Yellow Bird” that were both more compelling than any of the obvious 1960s theme songs.

Chris O’Dowd was brought in to add some spice to the role of the manager, and he hams it up to the max, again almost too much. This tries to compensate for the weaker performances of the women playing The Sapphires, who just could not convincingly portray girls from the late 1960s. It’s one thing to wear go-go boots and make-up, it’s another to create the vibe of the Age of Aquarius. The Sapphires play out as they are – modern girls who cannot capture the mood of the time and place.



Chris O’Dowd is Featured in ‘The Sapphires’
*Photo credit: The Weinstein Company*

Yet this is a very sincere film, and it’s fairly romantic. It has its heart in the right place, even though the narrative isn’t there, and the cast tries hard but acts as though they were being rushed through a short shooting schedule. In the end, because it doesn’t look or feel like a period 1960s film, it conjures up distracting nitpicks instead of a flow and passion. Perhaps with a bigger budget, or more time to put it together, a better experience could have been achieved.

And when it gets to the point when the wish is to get back to the country, folk or indigenous music, rather than warmed over “Soul Man” or The Supremes-style live karaoke, that equals a desire for something more original.

*“The Sapphires” continues its limited release in Chicago on March 29th. See local listings for show times and theaters. Featuring Jessica Mauboy, Chris O’Dowd, Deborah Mailman, Shari Sebbens and Miranda Tapsell. Written by Keith Thompson and Tony Briggs. Directed by Wayne Blair. Rated “PG-13”*

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