

Allen film stresses jazz and forgets story line

By Shelley Mika

Staff writer

It truly pains me to review Woody Allen's latest film, "Sweet and Lowdown." Not so much because it was a bad movie, but mostly because, as a longtime Allen fan, I was not sure I was even watching an Allen movie.

As movies go, "Sweet and Lowdown" has few flaws. But compared to other Woody Allen films, this one was a disappointment.

"Sweet and Lowdown" lacks the essential "Allen-ness" apparent in the greater part of the director's oeuvre. We don't see any of the lovable neurotic (except in commentary scenes where he seems pretty normal), absolutely no quintessential New York and none of the

underdog-meets-enchanted-woman romance so important in Allen's work.

Instead we get a biography of Emmet Ray, a fictional jazz guitarist played by Sean Penn. Ray is an interesting subject as he not only travels from city to city performing, but also has a taste for liquor, enjoys shooting rats at the dump and suffers from kleptomania. Though he obviously has his own quirks, Ray's eccentricities could never endear us as Allen's do.

Still, Penn nails the role by accurately reflecting Ray's intricate personality, bringing to the brash character a sensitivity that lies just below the surface. If there's one reason to see this film, it's to witness Penn's malleability as an actor.

Nearly equal to Penn's performance is that of Samantha Morton, who plays

REVIEW Sweet and Lowdown

STARRING: Sean Penn, Samantha Morton, Uma Thurman

DIRECTOR: Woody Allen

RATED: PG-13

GRADE: Compared to other films: A, compared to Woody Allen films: C-

FIVE WORDS: Dissatisfying meditation on jazz guitarist.

Ray's mute girlfriend, Hattie. Obviously the role leaves no room for dialogue, yet Morton provides a necessary depth for her character.

From these two characters — one sweet and humble, the other crude and egotistical — comes an expert balance of melancholy and humor. Though there is no real plot, the conflicting emotions Allen reveals provide a roaming climax.

At the same time, "Sweet and Lowdown" more or less floats by viewers, engaging their curiosity in Ray but not really providing a vested interest in his failure or success.

For the most part, this is because of the nature of the character. But one has



Courtesy photo
Sean Penn and Uma Thurman star in the Woody Allen picture "Sweet and Lowdown." The film opens tonight at the Mary Riepma Ross Film Theater.

to ask why, when Allen usually features a lead we can relate to, he would choose a subject so emotionally distant.

The only answer is also one of the few things "Sweet and Lowdown" has in common with Allen's earlier work: it's self-indulgent.

This film comes off as a way for Allen, a jazz fan, to work with masters such as Howard Alden and Bucky

Pizzarelli, who provide much of the guitar work for the film.

Indeed, the soundtrack is exceptional, as most Allen soundtracks are. For that reason alone, jazz fans will want to see this movie.

As for Allen fans, "Sweet and Lowdown" will probably leave you dissatisfied and running to rent "Annie Hall."

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