

'Famous' depicts '70s rock era

FAMOUS from 8

Maguire." Penny gets a better gig for William, a bus tour with "Stillwater," a four-man rock band trying to break into stadium stardom. For both Penny and William, there's an immediate connection with Russell (Billy Crudup), the lead guitarist who is good enough (and good-looking enough) to threaten taking the spotlight from frontman Jeff Bebe (Jason Lee).

The tour encapsulates most of the film, as William gets a job with Rolling Stone to write-up "Stillwater." He's faced with trying to get an objective story in the face of free booze and women, along with strange and growing feelings for Penny, who spends every night behind the "Do Not EVER Disturb" sign on Russell's door.

The surroundings are there - it's a plot-loaded movie that paints on a wide canvas with broad strokes - and Crowe, whose best film remains the distant and powerful "Say Anything," knows how to fuel a scene with charm and a weird mopey wit. The set production delivers with its 1970s live-in look.

And there's the music - though not as much as you'd guess - both the original "Stillwater" songs

written by Crowe and a soundtrack sampling of Elton John and The Allman Brothers, among others.

But the film goes static when you expect it to pop and bubble into its next gear. Not to say that carnage and hedonism have to fill the screen, but outside a minor drug overdose, life on the road seems a princess affair for groupies, their worst fears being dumped by the rock stars.

"Almost Famous" makes these girls heroes, as it must, I suppose, because Crowe saw them as such at 15.

"Stillwater" is a collection of clichés - both in character and in their typically, dumb, ego-driven clashes between band members. Of course, they're clichés for a reason - nobody will ever accuse rock stars of seeping logical brilliance.

Nonetheless, when the real truth comes to a head during a perilous lightning storm aboard a plane, Crowe handles a most important scene clumsily, topping it off with a painful joke that lost its spin for me five years ago.

That's mostly my problem, I suppose. For a movie made well enough to breathe 1973 into the movie theater, it's alienating to an extent. Crowe's one of the seminal rock journalists - other music

front-runners have applauded his accuracy.

But accuracy can have bite and groove - Paul Thomas Anderson's "Boogie Nights" is a fine example - and not lose its essential nature. Crowe's camerawork is almost lazy as it catalogues William's journey - unlike "Boogie Nights" which feels so alive, it verges on filmed heart attack. "Almost Famous" makes the surroundings seem more innocuous and boring than they probably were.

And, in the end, Penny's character is inserted with a tad more emotional and intellectual range than a 16-year-old girl might possess and an end that seems downright bizarre. Hudson, as comely as she is, was 20 during the shoot and acts every day of it.

Hoffman plays Lester flawlessly, and McDormand is graceful and funny, no surprise there. Other performances feel tweaked by Crowe. William seems a bit quick with life-involving advice. The Band-Aide is too sharp, too. It's like watching "That 70s Show" without the laugh soundtrack.

And I'm not sure a sitcom, albeit a meticulous and showy one, is what honest and unmerciful are all about. Love letters have their price.

Sequel fails to meet potential

LEGENDS from 8

to produce a sequel, didn't it? This is what William Goldman meant when he said in Hollywood, nobody knows anything.

This "Urban Legends" sequel hired one man to do the directing, editing and composing for the film - John Ottman - and ripped off the "Scream 3" plotline. In other words: this is a movie about people getting killed. And people who work on the movie get killed in the same way as they would have in the film.

The movie was written by two guys just out of University of Southern California's film school

in Los Angeles - strong adherents to the clever, in-joke school of screenwriting.

There's an aspiring filmmaker at a fictional film school, Amy (Jennifer Morrison), who battles hard to win the coveted Hitchcock Award, which guarantees some sort of automatic Hollywood career.

Her main competition is a brooding genius, Travis (Matthew Davis), on the verge of some masterpiece - he thinks. But when he gets a low grade on his thesis film, he commits suicide, or so it seems, until a look-a-like shows up, claiming he's Travis' twin brother, Trevor.

After the suicide, the deaths

start mounting. Graham (Lawrence), a Hollywood rich kid, is a suspect. So is a host of other film crew members. Oh, and if you believe the filmmakers, it's quite possible that Amy is making it all up... in her head. Maybe she is, considering she mistakes the killer, a tall, lanky-sort, for her 300-pound black friend.

A quote from Morrison in the press notes illustrates the inane nature of the film better than I can:

"It's a bizarre urban legend inside of an urban legend, inside of an urban legend while you're filming an urban legend," she says.

Oh boy.

Exhibit examines hip-hop art form

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK - They seem unlikely items for a museum exhibit - sneakers, handbills, a microphone.

But viewed along with clothing, lyric sheets and album posters, the items document the rise of one of the biggest cultural phenomena: hip-hop.

"Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhymes, and Rage" opened Friday at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the first stop in a national tour.

"The world is embracing a new attitude, and that attitude is influenced by hip-hop," said

museum director Arnold Lehman.

"Hip-hop has empowered so many of us, it's unbelievable," said guest curator Kevin Powell, who has been writing about the music and culture of hip-hop for years.

There are hundreds of pieces to look at, from graffiti art to Public Enemy's set list, to a document from the 1994 U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on music and violence.

Fashion looms large, with clothing donated by names from every era of hip-hop.

There's a hat from Kool DJ Herc, tennis shoes from Run D.M.C., a suit worn by the

Notorious B.I.G. and a jersey worn by DMX.

Four elements of hip-hop culture are highlighted: DJing, MCing, dance, and graffiti art.

The first section, "The Block Party," introduces viewers to those elements with demonstrations and interactive terminals where he or she can try his or her hand at DJing.

"The Roots" looks at hip-hop's origins, and showcases audio equipment from the 1970s and early 1980s, as well as items related to pioneers like Grandmaster Flash and Kurtis Blow.

Section three deals with the mid-1980s to 1990, considered hip-hop's creative "Golden Era." It introduces acts like the political Public Enemy, the feminist Queen Latifah and the gangsta N.W.A.

"Controversy: Outrage and the Rise of Gangsta Rap" focuses on the 1990s, which were marked by events like the deaths of Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G.

The last section, "Pop Goes the Culture," examines how hip-hop has come to dominate American youth culture.

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