

'21' proves predictable

Flashy Vegas movie entertains in spite of formulaic storyline

BY BEN YARNELL
Reviewer

I like going to the movies. In a way, it's like gambling — maybe even like making your bracket for the Big Dance.

Those with full-blown March Madness will research every team, weigh their pros and cons and then put their weight behind one team to go all the way.

That's kind of how it is with the new movie "21." The film chronicles the experiences of Ben Campbell,

a genius with numbers who is a little short on cash but dreams of attending medical school at Harvard. When his professor, Micky Rosa, approaches him with a spot on a blackjack team that takes Vegas for all it has, Ben discovers all of his desires and more are within grasp.

Chances are, not everyone has heard of this film, so that already makes it not a No. 1 seed. But we're not talking about an independent film like "Juno" either, so that would mean it's now a No. 16.

Then, you look at the roster to see what kind of talent this movie sports. "21" has a couple of big names. There is Kate Bosworth, who has had some

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Photo courtesy of Sony Pictures
Sony Pictures' new film starring Jim Sturgess, Kevin Spacey and Kate Bosworth proves successful in the box office, bringing in more than \$24 million.

money-makers like "Superman Returns." Then, you've got your marquee player, the one everybody knows. That player is Kevin Spacey, who plays Micky. Spacey is a high-quality actor who has taken "teams" like "The Usual Suspects," "Se7en" and "L.A. Confidential" all the way before, and he definitely pulls his weight now.

So let's just call "21" something like a No. 5 seed.

One of the most amazing things about the NCAA Cham-

ampionship Tournament is that there is always a level of unpredictability to it. Somebody will light up the night with an amazing performance. And in this movie, that breakout player has to be Jim Sturgess, who plays Ben. You might remember him as the beau lead from "Across the Universe," and Sturgess fully takes the reigns in this one and works the part for all it's worth.

Now, any team that thinks it will go anywhere in the tournament will have to at

least make sure it has the basics down pat. And "21" does in some areas. The smart, witty writing strays from the droll that normally comes with these sort of high-emotion dramas.

And it doesn't always take itself too seriously. There are moments that only can be described as comedy and, believe it or not, are actually funny.

But, like champs of the past, sometimes performance gets a little lazy and relies on plays that have worked be-

fore. And that is probably the biggest problem I have with this movie.

Some of the tricks are just so predictable. Like the montage. Yeah, sometimes it takes a little more work to make it clear that time has passed and things have changed in the plot. But, hey, here's a thought: Try to be a little more original. Set aside a few more days in the shoot schedule and make me think you are trying a little more than you actually are.

And then there is the big twist. Every movie has one, and "21" is no different. But it was almost painfully obvious what was coming well before it did. Maybe I've just seen too many movies, but if a movie wants to make it all the way through to win it all, it's got to do a little better than that.

So then, what to do with "21"? Well, I really don't see this one going all the way. It's not a bomb by any means, but it's no piece of cinematic history.

If this movie really were shooting it out in a tournament bracket, I only see it going into the Sweet 16, maybe Elite 8 in a big upset. But if you are looking for something to do on a weekend night, this movie ticket would be money well spent.

Counting Crows mix styles with mixed results in new CD

BY FRANKLIN K.R. CLINE
Reviewer

Counting Crows' latest record "Saturday Nights and Sunday Mornings," unsuccessfully attempts to reflect upon and unify the general split in pop music between rock (what the kids are listening to) and light rock (what the adults are listening to).

This is a tall order, but for this band it makes sense. Counting Crows has been around long enough to have fans in both groups, as those who grew up listening to its 1994 smash hit "Mr. Jones" have now conceivably altered their listening tastes toward the softer side as they approach middle age. A record for either the vinyl enthusiast or the Steppenwolf schizophrenic in all of us, "Nights" doesn't know what it wants to be — it's separated into two parts, with Saturday nights symbolized through rock and Sunday mornings presented as floaty adult contemporary.

The title and general division of

the record suggests one cohesive time period, a sleepless, bizarre union of contrasts — the Dionysian evening versus the Apollonian morning, the hedonistic Saturday against the tranquil Sunday. This is not high art, necessarily, but it is an interesting duality worthy of examining through a concept album.

Unfortunately, after a really rocking and enjoyable first half, the album falls flat about 10 seconds into its "Sunday Mornings" section, which is nothing more than a string of forgettable songs best served for dentists' offices, elevators, supermarkets or your mother's favorite radio station.

It's not that there aren't nice moments on the second half of this album. The strange vocal breakdown that ends "Anyone But You" is a perfect combination of Beach Boys-style harmony and Elephant 6-like carefree happiness. It works in that tune, but also serves to remind the listener that the Crows seem to be

stuck somewhere between old and new, between night and day.

The following track, "You Can Count On Me," has a nice melody hampered only by incredibly derivative lyrics out of a seventh-grader's diary: "If you think that you could go/If you wanted to be free/There's one thing you need to know/And that's that you can count on me" is as lazy as usually sharp songwriter Adam Duritz has ever gotten.

Duritz and the rest of the band remind us of their real ability on the album's second song, "Hanging Tree." Counting Crows' mission statement, for the first half of this record at least, is vaguely pushing the boundaries of pop music, particularly through a surprisingly rocking guitar solo and vocalist Duritz's trademark bizarre syncopation. Rocking guitar solos actually are all over the "Saturday Nights" portion of the album, and it's unfortunate that the band has three guitarists but no mention in the liner notes of who

played what and when.

Another standout track, "Cowboys," closes the album's "Nights" portion with wild, introspective lyrics that recall Duritz's initial freedom and talent as a songwriter found on their first album, "August and Everything After." How can you argue with hazy, wonderful imagery like "The president's in bed tonight but he can't get to sleep/Cause all the cowboys on the radio are killers," especially when it's put behind an all-out rocker complete with, of course, a screaming guitar solo?

It's really too bad that the Crows went with the silly concept of rock versus light rock because the second half only made me wish that either the album was over or that suddenly, inexplicably there would be another rocking track. But no — the second to last track of the album ends with a good 45 seconds of just piano and Duritz at his most transparently plaintive, begging, "Come back to me." She's just not that into you, Adam. Get over it.

As offensive as that ending is, it's not as bad as the album's lame attempt to pseudo-rock again with its final track, "Come Around." This track is the worst of the worst — not only does it slap you in the face with its attempt to unify the two obviously disparate sections of the album, but it also offers a watered-down, outright boring median between the night and morning, between rock and slow, piano-driven tunes. This leaves the listener wondering what the point of dividing the record was in the first place.

Ultimately, it seems as though Duritz and the rest of the Crows didn't want to be pegged as adult contemporary or as old dudes still trying to prove they've still got it with this album, so they've settled for a right-down-the-middle "rock versus pseudo-rock" compromise that falls flat on its face. Maybe I'm just a Saturday night type of guy instead of a Sunday morning one, but this album is only half-enjoyable.



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