

Energetic 'Idlewild' feels genuine

By ELEANOR RINGEL GILLESPIE <eringel@ajc.com>

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The less you know about the life and music of the phenomenally successful Atlanta-based duo OutKast, the more likely it is you may like their new movie "Idlewild."

I use the word "new" advisedly. Actually, the film was shot two years ago and has been sitting on the shelf while the studio, Universal, tried to figure out a way to market it. After seeing the movie, I can see the problem.

"Idlewild" is set in the fictitious Georgia town of Idlewild during Prohibition. Best friends since childhood, Percival (André Benjamin, aka "Dre") and Rooster (Antwan A. Patton, aka "Big Boi") now lead very different lives.

The former is a mortician's son with piano-man dreams. To that end, when he's not tending caskets, he's tickling the ivories at a nearby nightclub called Church. The latter is married, with five daughters and a beautiful but suspicious wife (Malinda Williams). Rightfully so. Rooster is the headliner at the nightclub and he's into the whole wine — make that, whiskey — women and song scenario.

Things get complicated when Rooster inherits Church. He inherits its problems as well — numero uno being Trumpy (played with coiled-snake menace by the ever-more-wonderful Terrence Howard), a cold-blooded killer who also supplies liquor to the club.

The movie is all over the place — an old-fashioned Broadway musical ("Finian's Rainbow," with its similarly stylized fictional South comes to mind) by way of MTV. The plot is as simplistic, familiar and, well, occasionally corny as a movie made in the early '30s, yet it's been directed with enormous energy, invention and visual flair by Bryan Barber, a frequent collaborator on OutKast's music videos.

The mix-and-match approach — modern music and period costumes — works far better here than it did in the loathsome "Moulin Rouge." And the film looks spectacular, with the kind of burnished look you associate with "The Sting."

But the disjointedness remains a problem, making it more difficult to form an emotional connection with the characters. My theory: This is very much the movie the rap duo wanted to make, and let's face it, no one in Hollywood was offering them roles of Prohibition-era characters in spats and wearing

garters on their sleeves. So the picture has a genuineness that works in its favor. A sense of these two men being committed to this particular project and refusing to settle for the usual in-the-'hood redundancy.

The stars get excellent support from gorgeous Paula Patton as a willowy singer from up North who makes Percival finally grow up and face his father (Ben Vereen), who expects him to take over the funeral parlor. *Oscar Dillon* is hilarious as Howard's genial, cigar-chomping yes-man. Also strong are a too-briefly-glimpsed Macy Gray and a blink-and-you'll miss-her Patti LaBelle.

The core question, of course, is how do Benjamin and Patton fare as actors? Pretty darn good, it turns out. In a meatier part that demands real acting chops, Benjamin is convincing and appealing. He makes good on the promise he showed in "Be Cool" and, especially, "Four Brothers"<<http://www.accessatlanta.com/movies/content/shared/movies/reviews/F/fourbrothers/index.html>>." Patton has that natural I'm-just-here-to-drink-and-have-fun charm that served Dean Martin and Jackie Gleason so well.

"Idlewild" is what it is, though you may never be quite sure what that "is" is. Still, it's a professional-looking picture, filled with talented, likable performers who give it their best. It may not be the movie OutKast fans wanted, but it certainly would appear to be the movie OutKast wanted to make.