

MOVIE CITY NEWS MCN

The Heroin King of Baltimore: The Rise & Fall of Melvin Williams

No matter how awful the crime and brutal the punishment, it's impossible for filmmakers to de-glamourize the rewards associated with organized crime and big-money drug dealing. After watching "American Gangster," for example, how many viewers would have traded the relatively brief amount of time Frank Lucas spent in prison for two weeks living the life of a drug kingpin? Ditto, Tony Montana. Much the same can be said about "The Heroin King of Baltimore: The Rise & Fall of Melvin Williams," a rudimentary documentary in which a man who amassed a fortune selling poison on street corners to kids is allowed the luxury to shape his life story the way he wants it to look. And, yes, it's pretty fascinating stuff. Williams began his life in crime as a gambler and pool hustler in the streets of Baltimore. His uncanny skills attracted the attention of adults only too willing to take the young wizard of odds under their wing and teach him the ways of the world. According to Williams, his career as a heroin dealer began in earnest when a cop planted narcotics on him during a bust and he figured he would reap the benefits of being a dealer if everyone assumed he was a criminal, anyway. Full of moxie, Williams arranged for a steady supply of junk and cocaine and he was off to the races. At one point, Williams was such a force in Baltimore's African-American community that city officials solicited his help in quelling the riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King. It gave him a sense of power no amount of money could buy. When he finally was caught and convicted, Williams took his medicine like an OG and got out in time to be immortalized on HBO's "The Wire." Indeed, series creator David Simon appears several times here to offer his insight into the man and his legacy. In addition to Williams' near-soliloquies and the recollections of reporters and cops, there are some cheesy dramatizations of street life in Baltimore.

- Gary Dretzka

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