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## Notorious (2009/Fox Blu-ray + DVD) + Kurtis Blow – The Hip Hop Anniversary Tour: Live In Cologne 2008 (MVD DVD)

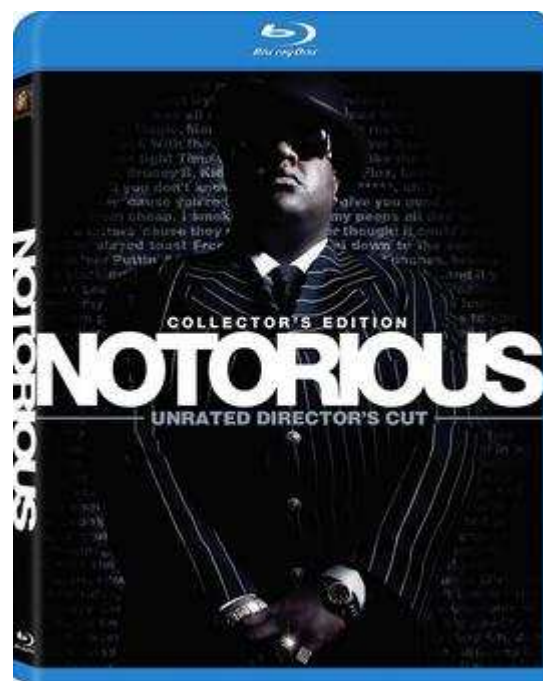
Picture: B/C+/C- Sound: B+/B-/C  
Extras: C+/D  
Film/Concert: C+

George Tillman Jr.'s **Notorious** (2009) tells the story of the brief life of the Hip Hop/Rap artist Christopher Wallace, who in his persona as The Notorious B.I.G. or Biggie Smalls, remains one of the most successful and key artists in the history of a genre that began in the late 1970s, peaked in 2000 and continues to hang on with less excitement.

Jamal Wollard is very good in the title role as the adult Wallace, while Christopher Jordan Wallace is the young B.I.G. in what is essentially a formula biopic with some good performances and ideas. Angela Bassett is also very good as his mother at all ages and they make this watchable, but despite the name-dropping of real-life people in their early days, the film has some interesting problems that held it back from larger commercial and critical success.

The Reggie Rock Blythewood/Cheo Hodari Coker script wants to be real and bring to life the time period, but like so many other biopics, it still follows a formula it cannot break from that was invented in the 1930s early sound era to tell us about men (yes, usually white) who did things like invent telephones and that means it shows the subject in a kinder light than would be real life. Punctuating this with sloppy attempts to be Martin Scorsese's **GoodFellas** does not work either as that is a New York School of filmmaking approach that is also not purely about the Black Experience, so the result is a long 129 minutes uncut (the 123 minutes theatrical cut is here too) film that never breaks away from playing it safe and we may get to know the life of the man, but it is never the character study something like Spike Lee's **Malcolm X** manages to be enough of.

However, the energy of the piece and some unexpectedly fun moments



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help, but other things are ignored, like the fact and myths of the supposed West Coast/East Coast conflict that is a story that needs to be told, but too many may still be scarred to deal with. Maybe it is just too ugly to deal with, but it is never really dealt with here and will have to be for a bolder film.

One of Biggie's biggest influences noted in the film a few times is the innovator Kurtis Blow, who is still performing and touring, as **The Hip Hop Anniversary Tour: Live In Cologne 2008** on DVD shows. It is one thing to drop his name in **Notorious**, it is another to see the man all these decades alter still alive, still having it over so many younger challengers and with great showmanship still being able to wow an audience. Like Biggie, he was an innovator and this may be only 51 minutes of the man in action, but it is enough to understand his impact on all who followed him, Biggie and the rest. That makes it a timely release by Music Video Distributors.

The 1080p 2.35 X 1 digital AVC @ 20 MBPS High Definition image on **Notorious** was shot in Super 35mm film by Michael Grady and the film looks good here for the most part, but the grain of the format creates soft edges that foil the performance, while many shots are stylized as such. The anamorphically enhanced DVD suffers by being much softer, less color rich and Video Black is weaker. The taped, anamorphically enhanced 1.78 X 1 **Blow** concert is not in good shape to begin with, including tape flaws, aliasing errors and an overall crude shoot that can be hard to watch. Good thing the music is good.

The DTS-HD Master Audio (MA) lossless 5.1 on **Notorious** is one of the best Hip Hop/Rap sound mixes you will get in any format and is a must for serious fans, delivering superior bass that will put most "hooptie" sound systems to shame, while the DVD only offers a Dolby Digital 5.1 mix, but it sounds good considering the old codec's limits. The **Blow** concert has Dolby Digital 2.0 Stereo that is compressed and flawed. Be careful of the levels you play it at too and that DVD has no extras.

Extras on both versions of **Notorious** include two deleted scenes, six making-of featurettes, two feature length audio commentaries with the director, writers and Editor Dirk Westervelt on one, the real Voletta Wallace (Biggie's mom!), Wayne Burrow and Mark Pitts (who worked on his music and career when he was alive) on the other, The B.I.G. 360 angle feature and never-before-seen footage of the real Biggie in concert. The Blu-ray adds Digital Copy and BD Live interaction.

- Nicholas Sheffo



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