

## Talk to Me

The new comedy-drama *Talk to Me* is an intriguing blend: 1) a slice of Washington life depicted through the work of famous DC disc jockey and all-purpose commentator Ralph Waldo “Petey” Greene, and 2) a complex character study matching Greene—man of the “street”—with his station programmer Dewey Hughes, representing the assimilated Negro. Both themes are firmly realized, principally through the two lead’s performances and secure direction by Kasi Lemmons.

The now-near legendary story of Petey Greene (Don Cheadle), a jailbird who became the voice of black DC, will be familiar to many Washingtonians. He goes more or less straight from Lorton Penitentiary to a spot as a morning deejay on soul station WOL in 1968, abetted by staffer Hughes (Chiwetel Ejiofor), who senses raw talent in him. More than a deejay, Greene becomes an on-air philosopher of the ‘hood, a scat-talkin’ brother who tells the truth to his listeners—“I’m the People” he announces--and creates a whole new audience for his station and its uneasy manager E.G. Sonderling (Martin Sheen). He also becomes a hero to many in this city in April 1968, when—observing the rioting going on in the aftermath of the Martin Luther King, Jr. assassination—he appeals to his loyal listeners to “cool it” and back off from violence. The height of his influence comes when he launches a citywide rally, introduces James Brown, and pleas for his brethren to “Put your anger away.”

This piece of the movie is Petey’s arc, and Cheadle, one of our very best character actors (*Crash*, *Hotel Rwanda*), carries off the role with panache. The actor is compelling, a mix of threat and of pathos, a guy who can lash out then tear up. He makes you believe in both the bristling side and the bantering side of the charismatic Greene, a man who could rap before its time and who never, ever forgot the grim reality of his upbringing. He’s very much in period, too, with a perfect Afro and a series of Sixties threads that stun (the costume designer deserves some kind of medal for Greene’s parade of vibrant suits).

As Petey’s fame grows, Dewey, who has become his manager, rides the wave with him, aiming for a payoff which represents Hughes’ own show business dream: a shot on his idol Johnny Carson’s “The Tonight Show.” Petey gets the dream gig in the end-of-show stand-up spot, but he can’t bring it off—he feels inauthentic before his white audience—and Dewey’s dreams are dashed. Years pass before the two men can, tentatively, uneasily reconcile before Greene’s early death at 53.

This second arc is Ejiofor’s, a man who is making significant inroads into American movies (*Inside Man*, *Melinda and Melinda*). A Nigerian by birth, he made his name in English movies like *Dirty Pretty Things*, and *Children of Men*. An assured, intelligent performer, he plays here a young man “from the Anacostia projects” who remakes himself as a respectable, company man, one who has repressed his tough background but still recognizes its potency.

Ejiofor’s steady poise is a lovely counterbalance to Cheadle’s flash. The two have their own ying-and-yang thing going: Dewey says: “I need you to say all the things I’m afraid to say,” while Petey counters with “I need you to do all the things I’m afraid to do.” Director Kasi Lemmons hasn’t made many feature films, only three in ten years, but her work has been complex and nuanced (*Eve’s Bayou*, *The Caveman’s Valentine*). She is solidly in command with *Talk To Me*, telling her story effectively (the screenplay

is by Michael Genet and Rick Famuyiwa) and handling her actors beautifully. Cedric the Entertainer gets an amusing cameo as the station's late-night, honey-voiced deejay "Nighthawk," and Martin Sheen, leaving behind his omniscient President Barlett from "The West Wind," rings some nice changes on alarm, exasperation, and bluster.

One qualification on the acting, however: Taraji Henson (so telling in last year's *Hustle and Flow*), plays Greene's tenacious girlfriend Vernell, but her presence is used mainly for facile laughs as the giddy, dumb sidekick who sports an Afro that—I swear—seems to grow like a Chia pet throughout much of the film. She stands out as too much of a stereotype in a picture whose chief characters are more than stock ones.

*Talk to Me* is another one of those Washington, D.C. movies that doesn't really much feature our mean or clean streets. It was mostly filmed, probably for budgetary reasons, in Toronto, and uses little local footage. This reviewer was able to catch only a few fleeting shots of the Mall (filmmakers just have to get the Capitol in the picture) and, in a flash, the outside of Ben's Chili Bowl on U Street.

While I honestly don't know how closely its narrative reflects the true history of Petey Greene, *Talk to Me* still delivers an absorbing tale of our town.

*("Talk to Me" is rated "R" for pervasive swearing and some sexual content.)*

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