

DRUG KINGPIN'S SAGA IS FLASHY, ENTERTAINING

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Friday, November 9, 2007

Author: JOHN MONAGHAN, FREE PRESS SPECIAL WRITER

"American Gangster" gets a subjective reality check from "Mr. Untouchable," a documentary about 1970s drug kingpin Leroy (Nicky) Barnes.

Where the new Denzel Washington film "Gangster" focuses on rival **Frank Lucas** ' cat-and-mouse game with law enforcement, "Untouchable" contends that it was Barnes who dominated the heroin market around New York City during the era. Lucas is dismissed as a "country boy" lacking style and sophistication.

Interview subjects include DEA agents, reporters and former Barnes associates. Barnes, in witness protection since his prison release in 1998, is seen here too, usually in silhouette or in close-ups of his hands, seated at a glossy meeting table as if he's still chairman of the board.

The overriding portrait of Barnes is as savvy entrepreneur and purveyor of the American dream. Others see him as a snitch and tool of the mafia who preyed on his own people.

Barnes committed his most notorious act of hubris when he allowed himself to be photographed for a New York Times Magazine cover that ran with the title Mr. Untouchable in 1977. Government officials, starting with then-President Jimmy Carter, made it a priority to put Barnes behind bars.

When this eventually happened, Barnes didn't like the way his former friends and his wife were running things. So he ratted out the lot of them. The movie reports that there is still a \$1-million bounty on Barnes' head, but I'm not sure who is in a position to pay.

Director Marc Levin ("Protocols of Zion") presents an appropriately flashy, criminally entertaining saga, backed by period music heavy on "Superfly"-era Curtis Mayfield.

Does the movie glorify Barnes and his nefarious profession? Probably, but show me a movie about the drug trade that doesn't hook us first with guts and glamour before the moralizing fall.

'Mr. Untouchable'

THREE STARS out of four stars

Rated R; language, violence, drug use

1 hour, 32 minutes

At the AMC Star Southfield

Contact freelance writer JOHN MONAGHAN at madjohn@earthlink.net.

ILLUSTRATION: Photo

CAPTION: Barnes on the 1977 cover.

DISCLAIMER: THIS ELECTRONIC VERSION MAY DIFFER SLIGHTLY FROM THE
PRINTED ARTICLE

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: FTR; FEATURES

Page: 3C

Index Terms: movie; review

Record Number: dfp0000502929

Copyright (c) Detroit Free Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.