

In 'Us', Jordan Peele holds a dark mirror to America

By Jake Coyle

Jordan Peele has tightened his grip in "Us", a less satirical and more slaughterhouse horror parable than the writer-director's astonishing debut, "Get Out", that despite its deficiencies will leave all who enter its shadowy world convinced of Peele's growing command as a singular conjurer of American nightmares.

It's a movie moment to savor. When was the last time a filmmaker's sophomore release was greeted with such anticipation? It's as if Peele struck such a deep and rich vein in "Get Out" that no one can wait to see what else he'll uncover. Peele has found a new passageway into American psychology, and we're all waiting outside the mine for him to call out from the dark with his latest revelation.

And in "Us", Peele has produced a terrifying artifact: a sinister ballet of doppelgangers and inversions that makes flesh the unseen underbelly lurking beneath every sunny American dream and behind every contented nuclear family. It's a scissor-sharp rebuke to anyone who's ever held hands and sang "Kumbaya".

"Us" begins on images of one such moment of supposed unity: Hands Across America, that wholesome '80s experiment in linking arms across the country. It's seen on an old TV screen with VHS tapes of "Goonies" and "C.H.U.D." leaning against it. Later, when the Wilson family takes a vacation near Santa Cruz, California, they look out

of their window at night and see the ominous silhouettes of a hand-holding family just like themselves outside on the driveway.

Their appearance is eerie to all: the mother Adelaide (Lupita Nyong'o), the father Gabe (Winston Duke) and their two kids, Zora (Shahadi Wright Joseph) and Jason (Evan Alex). But it's Adelaide who most immediately recognizes the danger. The Santa Cruz boardwalk is where she, as a young child, wandered into a carnival tent's hall of mirrors to find herself face-to-face with her exact double.

Increasing

That's the film's opening prologue before shifting to present day, and the scene, classically spooky, is perfectly realized by Peele. From the start, we feel Peele's increasing confidence as a filmmaker and, as Michael Abel's rhythmic, chanting score plays over the opening credits, we settle in for what we know, as soon as the Wilsons make their vacation plans, will be Adelaide's frightful reunion with her childhood mirror-image tormentor.

It comes fast, like an assault. Soon after unpacking their bags and after a day at the beach with some friends (Elisabeth Moss and Tim Heidecker), the red-dressed doubles appear. Their arrival is harrowing and violent and "Us" quickly takes the shape, a little disappointingly, of a home invasion movie. A student of both genre and satire, Peele's genius lies in his ability to sustain both. But in "Us", he sometimes

struggles to break free of genre tropes.

The Wilsons' doppelgangers are a kind of sadistic, scissor-wielding echo of each family member. As "Us" bleeds into one ghastly horror after another, we gradually grasp that they're part of a larger uprising of an underclass who are each horribly tethered to a surface-world human. Adelaide's double explains simply: "We're Americans."

"Get Out" proved Peele a master of metaphor but "Us" works less on a purely symbolic level than on its own infinite-loop system of horror. Some questions get answered but others don't. The doubles arrive with only slightly more reasoning than the crows did in Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds". Nightmares don't always need clarification.

But I do think "Us" would work better if it gathered its suspense more steadily and more closely tethered its ideas to its characters. If the doppelgangers are stand-ins for an otherness that we fear in others but deny in ourselves, I'm not sure zombie-like maniacs were the most interesting way to go, or the most humanizing. And Peele's script, delving so relentlessly into terror, doesn't leave either side of the mirror room for much reflection. "It's all just craziness," someone says.

Yet there's an undeniable power of "Us" as a deeper, more primal vision of a two-tiered truth in American society that's as unshakable as one's shadow. Peele, working with cinematographer Mike Gioulakis ("It Follows", "Glass"), creates fever-dream images with passionate precision. (AP)

Film

Variety



Singer Brandi Carlile performs on March 20 at Starbucks's annual shareholders meeting in Seattle. (AP)

Film

Docu focuses on the Nashville effect

'Bluebird' a love letter to tunesmiths

By Joe Leydon

As affectionate as a love letter but as substantial as an infomercial, Brian Loschivo's "Bluebird" may be of most interest to casual and/or newly converted country music fans who have occasionally wondered about the songwriters behind the songs. There's a better than even-money chance that anyone who's a loyal and longtime aficionado of the musical genre already has at least a nodding acquaintance with the history and significance of The Bluebird Cafe, the intimate Nashville venue often cited as a launching pad for both platinum-selling superstars and behind-the-scenes tunesmiths. On the other hand, even many of those individuals could be entertained by what amounts to a backstage tour.

Director-editor Loschivo capably balances the household names (Faith Hill, Garth Brooks, Kacey Musgraves) and unsung heroes (open-mic hopefuls, songwriters little known outside the Nashville music community) in the cavalcade of interviewees who, with degrees of enthusiasm ranging from nostalgic to reverential, tell the story of an improbable landmark in an unlikely setting.

Located in the middle of an unprepossessing strip-mall shopping center in the Green Hills area of Nashville, The Bluebird Cafe is a 90-seat restaurant and music club that founder Amy Kurland opened in 1982 as a conventional eatery featuring live performances, but gradually transformed into a place where up-and-coming songwriters could perform their compositions during open-mic nights — and other artists (including more established songwriters, open-mic alumni, and chart-topping notables) could sing and play their own tunes and material by other artists.

"It's kind of a combination of your living room and a church sanctuary," says award-winning singer-songwriter Sam Hunt, just one of the interviewees who vividly describe how close a performer is to the small but attentive audience during each stage-in-

the-round set at the cafe.

The immediate feedback can be daunting — one artist claims she can never sing certain tunes without noticing the tears forming in the eyes of listeners — and instructive. Jason Isbell remembers being so nervous during the first public performance of "Streetlights" at the Bluebird that he fumbled his own lyrics. But after receiving compliments specifically for what only he knew was a screw-up, he opted to change the words he wrote to the words he sang.

Performing

"Bluebird" abounds with tales of singer-songwriters who got their first big break while performing at the cafe on just the right night, when record company heavyweights were in the audience. Taylor Swift is infectiously exuberant during an unannounced, audience-astonishing return visit as she recalls being seen, and signed, by Scott Borchetta for his then-new Big Machine label when she was just 14 years old.

As counterpoint, however, the documentary does allow for some slightly discouraging words to be heard. Eric Paslay, writer or co-writer of such country hits as "Barefoot Blue Jean Night" and "Even If It Breaks Your Heart", pointedly cautions that "some of the greatest songs that have ever been written" will never be heard after their one-time-only performance at the Bluebird. Even the cafe's staffers in charge of culling the list of songwriters jockeying for a shot at overnight stardom — or at least a spot on the open-mic lineup — admit: "You've got to be careful to be just encouraging enough."

Cinematically speaking, "Bluebird" isn't the eponymous venue's first rodeo. The Bluebird Cafe figured prominently as a location in "The Thing Called Love", Peter Bogdanovich's underrated 1993 dramedy featuring River Phoenix, Samantha Mathis, Dermot Mulroney and Sandra Bullock as country-music hopefuls. Trisha Yearwood (another "Bluebird" interviewee here) fleetingly appears as herself in that earlier film, in a scene that suggests the best

way for a songwriter to get a break in Nashville is to break into a Nashville star's car.

But the cafe — or, to be more precise, a reasonable facsimile thereof — received a lot more screen time in "Nashville", the 2012-18 primetime drama about dreamers and schemers in Music City. Throughout the show's run on ABC and CMT, the TV series (which continues to attract viewers through streaming reruns) frequently positioned its characters inside a meticulously detailed lookalike set on a Nashville soundstage that persuasively doubled for the real Bluebird. In the documentary, singer-songwriter Steve Earle marvels: "It's frightening how accurate it is." Adds series star Charles Esten: "This isn't just a set or location. This is a cast member of 'Nashville'."

A sizable portion of "Bluebird" focuses on what might best be described as The "Nashville" Effect. Esten, Connie Britton and other veterans of the series speak warmly and gratefully about ways the TV show gained cred from country music fans by spending so much time at the faux Bluebird. (So much cred, in fact, that although it's not emphasized here, Esten, Clare Bowen and a few other singer-actors in the cast have had multiple opportunities to prove their musical bona fides in international concert tours, and on the Grand Ole Opry stage.) In turn, the series elevated the real venue's profile as a tourist attraction, fortuitously leading to a massive spike in admissions at a time when audience attendance had been dwindling.

Bluebird Cafe chief operating officer and general manager Erika Wollam Nichols bluntly admits: "It allowed us to keep our doors open." Even now, she adds, "a third of our revenue comes from merchandise" purchased by people drawn to the cafe by the TV show — and, of course, by the place's iconic status. Along with the branded posters, coffee mugs and T-shirts, "Bluebird" DVDs and Blu-Rays doubtless will be on sale at the establishment's souvenir counter for years to come. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Excellent! "Bill & Ted 3" has a release date.

Keanu Reeves and Alex Winter will return to the big screen in "Bill & Ted Face the Music" on Aug 21, 2020. The duo made the announcement in a short video shot at the Hollywood Bowl, where they'll "never play". Production began on Wednesday.

Reeves will again portray Ted "Theodore" Logan and Winter will reprise his role as Bill S. Preston, Esq. The two previous films were 1989's "Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure" and 1991's "Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey".

Dean Parisot ("Galaxy Quest") will direct from a script by original creators Chris Matheson and Ed Solomon. Scott Kroopf ("Limitless") will produce with Alex Lebovici and Steve Ponce of Hammerstone Studios, with Steven Soderbergh executive producing alongside R. Scott Reid, Scott Fischer, John Ryan Jr. and John Santilli. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: From a boy (who's loved) to He-Man.

Noah Centineo is in talks to take on the superhero in Sony Pictures and Mattel Films' "Masters of the Universe".

Brothers Adam and Aaron Nee are directing the reboot.

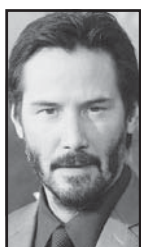
Mattel Films is partnering with Sony on the movie, which is based on Mattel's beloved toy line that spawned a successful animated TV series (1983-85) as well as a 1987 film. The property centers on the warrior He-Man, the last hope of a magical land called Eternia. Dolph Lundgren starred in the original movie as the title character, while Frank Langella played the villainous Skeletor.

Escape Artists' Todd Black, Jason Blumenthal, and Steve Tisch, as well as DeVon Franklin will be producing. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: The first look at "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood" is finally here, and Quentin Tarantino is taking audiences back to the height of hippie Hollywood. Starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Brad Pitt, the footage fea-

tures a montage of Tinseltown in the late 1960s. The duo play Rick Dalton and Cliff Booth, a washed-up actor and his long-time stunt double.

"Actors are required to do a lot of dangerous stuff," DiCaprio's character trailer explains in the trailer. "Cliff, here, is meant to help carry the load." Pitt's Cliff Booth seconds



Reeves



Centineo

that notion. "What, carrying his load? Yeah, that's about right." (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Elizabeth Debicki and Robert Pattinson are on board to co-star with John David Washington in Christopher Nolan's next movie, Variety has learned.

Nolan recently finished the script for the currently untitled film and Warner Bros quickly dated it for July 17, 2020 — a slot the studio often reserves for the director, most recently with "Dunkirk". Not only was that film a success at the box office, bringing in \$526 million worldwide, but it also earned Nolan an Oscar nomination for director,

his first in the category. The project has become one of the more highly coveted ones in Hollywood, even though most of the industry has been kept in the dark about everything from casting to plot details. One insider described the pic as a massive action blockbuster, which will again be shown in Imax. (RTRS)