

Reverential Bio-Pic Successfully Recasts Smut Peddler as Humanitarian

Written by Film Review by Kam Williams



Hugh Hefner: Playboy, Activist and Rebel

Before seeing this film, I only thought of Hugh Hefner as a purveyor of smut who built an empire on the backs, or should I say breasts, of females by reducing them to sex objects whose sole purpose was to fuel the testosterone-fueled fantasies of teenage boys. While this reverential bio-pic did nothing to disabuse me of the notion that the hedonistic octogenarian remains an inveterate, exploitative male chauvinist, it did a great job of convincing me that he also happened to be an effective advocate of racial equality during the Civil Rights Era.

Thus, much in the way that the recent documentary about frozen-fazed, comedienne Joan Rivers managed to humanize a freak long since dismissed as a cosmetic surgery victim, here we have a notorious womanizer successfully recast as an altruistic humanitarian. Directed by Oscar-winner Brigitte Berman, the final cut of *Hugh Hefner: Playboy, Activist and Rebel* was reportedly much longer before the German-born Oscar-winning filmmaker (for *Artie Shaw: Time Is All You've Got*), was forced to let five probably priceless hours of celluloid hit the cutting floor.

Still, what remains is a cinematic treat chock full of archival footage of Hef in his heyday. The film shows how in 1951 he published the first issue of *Playboy* with \$8,000 borrowed from friends and family. The rest of the front story is history, as the magazine's circulation skyrocketed, and he proceeded to open Playboy Clubs all over the country.

However, what many might not know is how progressive Hugh was back then politically, such as in hiring writers blacklisted by the McCarthy House Un-American Activities Committee. The first subject of the now legendary *Playboy* interview was an African American, Miles Davis, as were many of the entertainers booked to perform on the syndicated TV series

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"Playboy's Penthouse

," which enjoyed a short run in the late Fifties. We also learn that there was no color line at any Playboy Club, and when the owners of the New Orleans outlet violated that understanding by excluding Blacks, Hefner took the franchise away from them.

Besides highlighting such altruistic heroics, the film features plenty of shots of Hef surrounded by a bevy of scantily-clad blonde bimbos. But don't expect much in the way of nudity. There are instead many current-day cameos by some well-known habitués of the Playboy Mansion. Among the many celebrities waxing orgasmic about their visits are rocker Gene Simmons, actor James Caan and comedian Bill Maher. And weighing-in about Hefner's social activism are NFL great Jim Brown, comedian Dick Gregory folk singer Pete Seeger and the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

A well-deserved tribute to an American icon that manages to turn the nation's most-famous dirty old man into a champion of racial justice right before your very eyes. Who knew?

Excellent (4 stars)

Rated R for graphic nudity and sexuality.

Running time: 124 Minutes

Studio: Phase 4 Films

To see a trailer for Hugh Hefner, visit:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAZgIQpdLZE>