

BEST BETS

Austin Butler's portrayal of the king of rock 'n' roll in 'Elvis' is chill bump-inducing

By TOM NETHERLAND
FOR BRISTOL NOW

BRISTOL, Tenn. — Elvis Presley's life and career embodied extravagant dreams materialized, dazzling fantasies multiplied and horrific nightmares realized.

Witness it all in Hollywood's latest biopic, the Baz Luhrmann-directed "Elvis," which charts Presley's journey from Tupelo, Mississippi, poverty to the worldwide fame that outlived him. The latest among a long line of Hollywood biopics to tackle Presley succeeds in spades, with Austin Butler portraying the king of rock 'n' roll while Tom Hanks resurrects Presley's longtime manager, Col. Tom Parker.

The near-epic film currently screens at Marquee Cinemas Pinnacle 12 in Bristol, Tennessee, and Legacy Theaters Bristol 14 in Bristol, Virginia.

At least a modicum of suspension of disbelief should accompany moviegoers whenever they enter a movie theater. "Elvis" is no exception.

Otherwise, how to explain the believability of special-effects wizardry that propels Marvel's empire of action movies?

Movies made about famous people amount to walking a thin and shaky line. One slip, and everyone notices. Too many slips, the movie bombs. Consider 2015's abysmal "I Saw the Light," which



Three posters show Austin Butler as Elvis Presley in different stages of his career from the new Baz Luhrmann-directed 'Elvis,' in which Butler nails every nuance of the late king of rock 'n' roll.

attempted to relay the story and music of country music's hill-billy Shakespeare, Hank Williams. It bombed.

Not so with "Elvis."

Thanks to considerable makeup and props, Hanks ably revives the wildly selfish Col. Parker. As the film's narrator and Presley's controlling, dicta-

torial and downright evil manager, the Oscar-winning actor nails him. Parker's carny-like circus-man personality comes through as vividly as Presley's

curled lip.

Butler as Presley, that's the hard sell. After all, if Elvis weren't so difficult to recreate, surely someone would have successfully done so by now. Obviously, Butler does not step into the rock king's blue suede shoes so convincingly that audiences can suspend all form of disbelief.

Or do they?

Seeing and hearing can amount to believing. In Butler's portrayal, he far surpasses Kurt Russell's anemic attempt in the 1979 television movie, "Elvis." Same with David Keith's stab in 1988's horrid "Heartbreak Hotel." Oh, and Don Johnson (you know, "Miami Vice") as Elvis in 1981's "Elvis and the Beaty Queen"? Best to move along.

No one in cinematic history has ever brought Presley back in a persuasive manner. Until now. Early in "Elvis," Butler as Presley in pink and onstage at the Louisiana Hayride bounds from the screen in stunning detail. Butler sings Presley's rockabilly thumper "Baby Let's Play House." Though his voice is thinner than Presley's, Butler breathtakingly revives the hip swiveling and — much more difficult — the cavernous charisma of the future rock king.

Frankly, it's chill bump-inducing.

Rating: Four out of five stars.

Gardens, da Vinci exhibit highlight summer at Biltmore

By J.H. OSBORNE
josborne@bristolnow.news

ASHEVILLE, N.C. — This summer, embrace the season's longer days by exploring Biltmore's historic gardens at their most colorful and green, a new exhibition that highlights the genius of Leonardo da Vinci and an exciting array of outdoor experiences to enjoy with the family.

GLORIOUS GARDENS

Summer's warm, golden months bring such lush beauty to Biltmore that founder George Vanderbilt wrote, "I only wish everyone could see it at this season for the first time" in a long-ago letter to Frederick Law Olmsted, the estate's landscape architect.

These many years later, the gardens envisioned by Olmsted continue to thrive due to the work of Biltmore's horticulture team staying true to his original intent. Their work yields enormous, hearty palms and gemstone-colored blooms in the walled garden, while lotus, Victoria water platters, papyrus and canna lilies show off in the Italian garden pools.

For visit planning, information about what's blooming in Biltmore's gardens can be found in the Biltmore Bloom Report, updated frequently by Bill Quade, Biltmore's senior manager of horticulture.

LEONARDO DA VINCI – 500 YEARS OF GENIUS

On July 14, Biltmore will open "Leonardo da Vinci – 500 Years of Genius" at Amherst at Deerpark.

This unique exhibition explains and draws together all aspects of da Vinci's life and times, his key achievements and how his talents, thoughts, innovations and inventions are still just as relevant today, some 500 years later.

This immersive experience is displayed alongside multiple large-scale machine inventions, many of which are interactive, and detailed reproductions of da Vinci's masterpieces, codices and drawings.

Amherst at Deerpark is an event venue on the estate, adjacent to Deerpark Restaurant. Visitors should allow



Biltmore Estate's Italian garden features lotus, Victoria water platters, papyrus and canna lilies. For information about tickets and reservations, visit www.biltmore.com.



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ample time to enjoy the entire experience, including a large gallery with timelines and other background information about the artist, the immersive experience and a gift shop.

Ticketing for the exhibition is by reservation, including date and time, and admission to the exhibition is a \$30 add-on to

daily ticket prices.

Annual passholders also must pay an additional fee to visit the exhibition.

EXPLORE THE ESTATE

Biltmore's big backyard is the perfect place to explore an array of outdoor activities that are fun for the whole family. Kids 9 and younger are admitted free all summer. Some of

these include:

- **Birding experiences:** Falconry, Bluebird Walk, Guided Bird Walks.

- **Mindfulness experiences:** Shinrin Yoku (Forest Bath), Nature Mandalas, Sensory Journey Hike, Morning Meditation.

- **Action-oriented experiences:** Horseback riding, hiking, archery, kids fishing, kayaking, fly

fishing, guided rafting, carriage rides, guided bike rides, farmyard visits, sporting clays.

OVERNIGHT STAYS

For the ultimate summer at Biltmore experience, extend your visit by staying over at one of the estate's lodging options.

The Inn on Biltmore Estate invites guests to

enjoy world-class service and luxurious spa treatments.

At Village Hotel on Biltmore Estate, guests are just steps away from Biltmore's Winery in an ideal home base for enjoying a variety of restaurants, shops and outdoor activities.

The Cottages on Biltmore Estate offer four stand-alone accommodations, offering the most exclusive and customized lodging experiences the estate has to offer.

SUMMER HOLIDAY STAY PACKAGES

- **The Leonardo da Vinci Stay Package, July 13 – Nov. 3:** In addition to accommodations, this package includes a chef's breakfast buffet, one daytime admission to Biltmore House with an audio guide and one daytime admission to "Leonardo da Vinci – 500 Years of Genius."

- **The Inn on Biltmore Estate, Labor Day Celebration Package with Love Canon, Aug. 31 – Sept. 7:** The package includes accommodations, a chef's breakfast buffet daily, a Labor Day celebration dinner with live concert by Love Canon, lawn games and fireworks display.

For more information on Biltmore Estate ticket prices or to make reservations, visit www.biltmore.com.



LIONS GATE ENTERTAINMENT

Randal (Jeff Anderson) and Dante (Brian O'Halloran) offer typical 'Clerks' movie humor with added emotional depth.

Kevin Smith completes trilogy with best 'Clerks' movie yet

By TOM NETHERLAND FOR BRISTOL NOW

Kevin Smith finally made a love story.

Rampant irreverence marked 1994's "Clerks." Kevin Smith's directorial feature film debut, "Clerks," followed a day in the life of two neighboring store clerks, best friends Dante at the Quick Stop and Randal at the movie rental store. Filmed on location in Leonardo, New Jersey, Smith famously made the movie on a drastically slim \$27,000 budget. To date, it has grossed more than \$3 million.

"Clerks" became a cultural phenomenon among that era's generation.

Smith returned to the enterprise with "Clerks II" in 2006. Made for \$5 million, it grossed more than \$24 million worldwide.

Nearly 30 years after the original and 16 years after the second installment comes "Clerks III." It's a homecoming for Smith and the crew. As with the original, "Clerks III" was filmed on location at and inside the real Quick Stop store. Smith worked there in his younger days, from which his experiences led to "Clerks."

Brian O'Halloran returns as Dante, and Jeff Anderson revives his character, Randal. Characters Jay (Jason Mewes) and Silent Bob (Kevin Smith) augment "Clerks" much in the same way they did in the previous two installments — with some catches.

Fast forward to today, and Randal's video store now serves CBD and similar supplies, and it's run by pot dealers of yore, Jay and Silent Bob.

Now, Dante and Randal co-own the Quick Stop. They're as irreverent as ever, still ready with wisecracks about each other, as well as acquaintances and customers. Furthermore, their vast knowledge of pop culture and references to primarily "Star Wars" and comic books seem as sharp as ever.

As in the past, Dante frets over his place in life. Randal doesn't seem to care about his or Dante's lot in life. Then, in the store, Randal collapses. He suffers a major heart attack. Dante hustles to be with his buddy, to lend assurances he will be okay. While hospitalized, Randal has a revelation: He wants to make a movie about his life at the Quick Stop. Dante attempts to dissuade him, but Randal is unmovable.

Upon release, Randal hastily writes the script for the movie. He casts himself as himself, Dante as Dante and such friends as Jay and Silent Bob as themselves. Random customers are included, too. Eventually, Randal decides to film the movie in black and white. Also, he needs \$27,000 to make the movie.

Sound familiar? Other than the heart attack, that's essentially how Smith made his original "Clerks." (And Smith's own heart attack in 2018 inspired the plotline for "Clerks III.")

"Clerks III" revisits the filming of "Clerks," telling the tale of Randal and Dante as they endeavor to make a film with Quick Stop at its center. It's a clever way to stroll down movie-making memory lane.

But Smith's cleverness doesn't end there.

He wisely incorporates generous doses of drama into his comedy.

Dante mourns the death of his wife throughout the movie. We see him visit her gravesite as he sits on the ground and openly yearns for her. It offers strong emotion, particularly when she appears to him. She implores him to move on, but Dante sees nothing left for him in life with her gone.

Poignancy is not in short order during "Clerks III." Yes, here are goofy, rapid-fire jokes and comments (particularly from Jay) and language that no parent would want their small child to hear. (Some would make Larry Flynt blush, if only he could still blush.) They're funny enough to make one think they'd become cry-a-second Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. Tears of laughter will flow.

But, with no reveal, tears of sadness will appear, too. Unlike his career-making "Clerks," Smith's "Clerks III" possesses a depth that elevates it to high cinematic art. It's an ode to independent filmmakers. It's also a generous nod to Smith's younger days of working at Quick Stop, back when he was trying to figure out life. It's also a salute to his pals who play the parts in each of the three films.

Stay around after the film's credits. A short documentary on the making of "Clerks III" and the history of the franchise provides outstanding insight into its back-to-basics making.

"I wanted to make a love letter to indie films," an obviously moved Kevin Smith says.

Rating: 4.5 out of five stars



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FILM REVIEW



FOCUS FEATURES

Lydia Tár (Cate Blanchett) leads the drama that reflects a musical composition with its crescendos and decrescendos throughout the film.

‘Tár’ builds like a climactic musical arrangement

By TOM NETHERLAND
FOR BRISTOL NOW

Cate Blanchett’s newest movie just might earn her as many awards as the movie’s character and main maestro, Lydia Tár. In the form of the film “Tár,” a cinematic triumph greets Hollywood’s awards season. Hollywood studios typically release the bulk of their prospective Academy Award winners each fall and winter. Indeed, Focus Features and many involved in the making of the ambitious “Tár” may want to clear space on their mantels. An articulate exploration of a mind askew, “Tár” revolves around Cate Blanchett’s performance as gifted classical musician Lydia Tár. Written, directed and produced by Todd Field, “Tár” clocks in at two hours and 38 minutes. Because of its length and measured storyline, an investment of intent focus should accompany those who view the film. Worth every second imparted, “Tár” captivates in ways that Hollywood movies rarely do nowadays. The film is now playing at Legacy Theaters Bristol 14 in Bristol, Virginia, and Marquee Cinemas Pinnacle 12 in Bristol, Tennessee. Stock up on snacks when seeing this one. “Tár” thrives on careful subtlety and well-placed nuance. Cate Blanchett becomes Lydia Tár, a fictional, world-renowned classical conductor, composer and pianist. Within 10 minutes, the two-time

Oscar-winning actress melds into the character, a standpoint from which she provides a fascinating study in the devolution of a mind in psychological peril. Lydia defines as a genius. She’s won Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony awards. Dizzying as her life appears, she seems well in control. She teaches young aspiring musicians. She conducts a major German orchestra. She has an idyllic life of family, friends, fame and wealth. And yet clues abound as to cracks in Lydia’s world. Ever so gradually, we can detect that she’s manipulative and controlling, a maestro whose direction extends well beyond the stage. For one, we’re given brief information on a woman named Krista, an aspiring young conductor, who eventually commits suicide. We also witness Francesca (Noémie Merlant), who has apparently supplanted Krista as Lydia’s new — and quite attractive — young assistant and hopeful conductor-to-be. Innuendo peeks around the corner of the film like tiny red flags of caution. As the movie builds, so do the innuendos and startling revelations. Lydia and her partner Sharon (played excellently by Nina Hoss), the first violinist in the orchestra that Tár conducts, seem well in love. Yet Sharon is among the first in the film to imply that all is not hunky-dory. Sharon’s fretful, knowing eyes, incredibly expressive, indicate early in the movie

that Lydia is not all that she professes to be. Though we see little to no sexual interaction between Lydia and her young charges in and near the orchestra, we are given ample clues about their existence. Furtive glances. Alluring blinks of eyes. Beyond the surface of Lydia’s orderly life seethes a time bomb bound to blow. Slowly developing changes in Tár’s demeanor provide additional evidence. As time eases by, Tár’s seams begin to split, and what simmers below the surface gradually begins to boil. Scenes, which were long and leisurely in the movie’s first half, shorten and gather speed as the movie reaches its pinnacle. In sum, “Tár” rates as spectacular cinema. And it’s different. For instance, it’s exceedingly rare that all of a film’s credits run before we meet its characters. Indeed, the movie begins and ends with a full scrolling of credits — a clue to viewers that the experience of this movie is unlike any other being made today. It’s a microscopic character study of power and the powerful. Indeed, considerable comparisons between “Tár” and Orson Welles’ 1941 masterpiece “Citizen Kane” can be made. What begins as a heavenly life spirals into a vortex of hell. Life among those who appear to have it all, as we bear witness to in stunning detail throughout “Tár,” is not always as it seems. **Rating: Four and a half stars out of five**

Johnson City unveils historic marker commemorating local bluegrass record label

By JONATHAN ROBERTS
jroberts@bristolnow.news

JOHNSON CITY, Tenn. — For East Tennessee State University’s Dr. Ted Olson, Friday was the culmination of years of work. It was 2016 when Olson and other researchers from ETSU began digging into the history of bluegrass record label Rich-R-Tone Records, which was founded in Johnson City in 1946 — the same year historians believe the first bluegrass records were recorded in Nashville. On Friday, Olson was on hand as Johnson City and ETSU unveiled a state historical marker commemorating Rich-R-Tone Records near Founders Park, close to where it once stood.

“This is the important point at which the story becomes public,” said Olson, a professor in ETSU’s Department of Appalachian Studies. Rich-R-Tone Records was founded in Johnson City by James Hobart Stanton, and the label issued the first recordings by bluegrass artists the Stanley Brothers and Wilma Lee and Stony Cooper. It was the earliest record company based in East Tennessee. “When people think of music and Tennessee, they automatically think of Memphis and Nashville, but today’s event reminds us that Johnson City has played a significant role in the history of bluegrass, old-time country music, as well as other American musical traditions,” said Dr. Ron Roach, chair of ETSU’s Department of



JONATHAN ROBERTS/BRISTOL NOW

James Hobart Stanton’s family members pose for a photo next to the marker located right next to the Farmers Market Pavilion in Johnson City. There was no shortage of bluegrass music being played on Friday, including some from a man who recorded a song for Rich-R-Tone Records back in 1969.

Appalachian Studies. “Our region of Appalachia has given many important gifts to the world, but none is more important than the gift of music, which has touched people all over the world.” Olson said the marker should be a point of pride for the city, which can now say it was home to one of the first bluegrass record labels in the world. “It’s inconceivable that the genre would have developed the way it did without James Hobart Stanton’s work with Rich-R-Tone Records and the amazing artists that he signed to the label,” said Olson, who is also fundraising money to release a box set of recordings from Hobart Stanton and his

other music labels, such as Folk Star Records. Johnson City Mayor Joe Wise read two proclamations on Friday, one honoring the Stanley Brothers and the other honoring Hobart Stanton. “I just want to say thank you on behalf of our family,” said Debbie Ward, who accepted the proclamation from the mayor honoring her grandfather, Hobart Stanton. Ward’s father and Hobart Stanton’s son, Chester Powell, passed away in September. Roach said Powell played a big role in making the historical marker happen. “We’re so proud, and I know my dad’s looking down smiling about this,” said Ward. “He was really proud of this, so thank you.”

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