Café Society: Woody Allen's love letter to the wealthy and famous

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Written and directed by Woody Allen

Woody Allen has now made 47 feature films, including at least one every year since 1982. The octogenarian is prolific, but with ever diminishing returns. His latest effort, *Café Society*, supplies further, unhappy evidence of this trend.

Producing a review of each new film has become a largely thankless annual task. Nonetheless, *Café Society* aroused curiosity for two reasons. First, there is still the vestigial interest associated with a movie by a filmmaker who once had amusing things to say. Second, this year's film was apparently making reference to the real "Cafe Society"—legendary venues in uptown and downtown Manhattan that for a decade—from the late 1930s to the late 1940s—welcomed black and white artists who performed before a racially mixed and often politically radical audience. Unfortunately, any resemblance between Allen's film and the trail-blazing establishments stops with the movie's title.

Set in the 1930s, Allen's *Café Society* follows Bobby Dorfman (Jesse Eisenberg), the youngest son of a Jewish jeweler in New York City. In search of excitement, he decides to move to Hollywood to work for his uncle Phil (Steve Carell), a powerful talent agent and inveterate name-dropper. Bobby leaves behind his anxious, overbearing parents, Rose (Jeannie Berlin) and Marty (Ken Stott), his gangster brother Ben (Corey Stoll), his twitchy but kind-hearted sister Evelyn (Sari Lennick) and her milquetoast husband Leonard (Stephen Kunken), whom Allen—the film's narrator—describes as a Communist.

Almost immediately, Bobby falls for Phil's secretary, Veronica, or "Vonnie" (Kristen Stewart), an unassuming girl who tells Bobby she is in love with a married man. Complications arise when Phil, unaware of Bobby and Vonnie's budding romance, confides in his nephew that he wants to leave his wife and children and marry Vonnie. Ultimately, she has to choose between the two men.

Bobby returns to New York, where he begins managing Ben's glitzy, popular nightclub. Being a wealthy businessman does not prevent Ben from dealing violently with his various adversaries. Eventually, Bobby meets a beautiful socialite, also named Veronica (Blake Lively), but the original "Vonnie" is never far from his thoughts.

Despite the presence of a few (painfully few) comic lines, Allen's film is extraordinarily perfunctory. In fact, discussing the narration and dialogue is difficult because the language and thoughts are so pedestrian that almost none of it leaves an impression. The various characters and locales are presented in a thoroughly clichéd or indifferent manner: i.e., celebrities in Hollywood have big houses and throw extravagant, sun-drenched pool parties with lots of cocktails, Greenwich Village (in New York) is inhabited by poets and painters who hang out in small clubs listening to late-night jazz, etc.

These banal lines are typical: "Love is not rational. You 'fall' in love. You lose control." "There's a certain magic to Central Park at dawn." "It's all about ego, this whole town [Hollywood] runs on ego." "Life is a comedy written by a sadistic comedy writer." At the night-club Ben owns, we are told, "One could find the driest martinis and the most beautiful girls." At one point, Phil exclaims, "What is age, if you're really in love?"

There is a flatness and lack of depth to Allen's films these days that is both peculiar and startling. Virtually none of the relationships are believable. There is no real chemistry between the lovers, nor, for that matter, between family members. The characters are not dislikeable, they simply lack significant definition or substance. One feels the presence, more than anything else, of Allen's own intense self-involvement, the intense self-involvement of an entire upper middle class social layer, which leaves little room for any other concerns.

While Allen has Bobby's intellectual brother cite Socrates' famous dictum, "The unexamined life is not worth living," *Café Society* accommodates itself to the present cultural atmosphere, above all, by not examining life or society, or its own assumptions.

In his films of the 1970s and 1980s, for all their limitations, Allen heaped scorn on the status-seeker, the opportunist, the unprincipled striver after money and career, on behalf of the self-sacrificing and observant artist or intellectual.

It was not so long ago that Allen displayed a more critical attitude toward the rich and famous. Regarding his 1998 *Celebrity*, which contained a scene skewering a spoiled, self-centered actor played by Leonardo DiCaprio, the WSWS wrote: "Is Woody Allen self-absorbed? Yes. Does the director suffer from a lack of self-criticism, in the sexual and nearly every

other arena? Yes. Aren't nearly all his films, including his better ones, marred by trivia, dead spots, childishness, too many jokes that go nowhere? Yes. Isn't he ... ? Aren't his films ... ? Didn't he ... ? Yes. Yes. Yes. One can make all sorts of arguments against Allen and his films, but the fact remains that here he is entirely in the right in his critique of a mindless, hedonistic, success-obsessed culture. Any genuine opponent of the status quo would welcome this film."

But now, unfortunately, there is not much left at all. The great moral dilemma at the center of *Café Society* is whether the well-to-do sophisticate will have a better time of it in Los Angeles or New York.

Allen appears to have given up on virtually every front. He has surrendered to the prevailing winds, and has joined the ranks of the self-satisfied and socially conformist. This complacent comment (to the *Hollywood Reporter*) about the 2016 elections is characteristic: "I'm a Hillary [Clinton] fan. I like Bernie [Sanders] very much. I think what he espouses is wonderful. But I think Hillary will get more done of what Bernie would like than Bernie could get done. … I've met [Donald] Trump because he was in one of my movies, *Celebrity*. He's very affable, and I run into him at basketball games and at Lincoln Center. And he is always very nice and pleasant."

Café Society, the film, is without a hint of rebellion or protest, or genuine artistry, as opposed to Cafe Society, the club in the 1930s and 1940s. The references are oblique, including the title of his film, but clearly Allen is intending to make a connection of some kind to that groundbreaking establishment.

Owner Barney Josephson opened Cafe Society Downtown (Cafe Society Uptown was opened two years later) in December 1938 (one of the worst years of the Depression) in Greenwich Village. In *Cafe Society—The wrong place for the Right people*, co-authored with his wife, Terry Trilling-Josephson, Josephson explains: "I wanted a club where blacks and whites worked together behind the footlights and sat together out front. There wasn't, so far as I knew, a place like it in New York or in the country."

As the book's dust jacket explains, "Cafe Society featured the cream of jazz and blues performers—among whom were Billie Holliday, Big Joe Turner, Lester Young, Buck Clayton, Big Sid Catlett, and Mary Lou Williams—as well as comedy stars Imogene Coca, Zero Mostel, and Jack Gilford, the boogie-woogie pianists, and legendary gospel and folk artists." Other artists who performed there included Sarah Vaughan, Lena Horne and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the gospel singer and acoustic guitarist. Charlie Chaplin was a guest in 1947. John Hammond, the renowned record producer (and also close to the Communist Party), was a key advisor to Josephson. Black intellectuals like Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes and E. Franklin Frazier frequented the club. The list of jazz musicians is too long to include. All in all, this was a remarkable place.

The name of the club was meant ironically. This was *not* the locale for the rich and officially celebrated. Its walls, according to the Josephsons' book, "were festooned with artistic and satirical murals lampooning what was then called 'high society.'" The very opposite of the film's attitude and stance! Moreover, Allen has the effrontery to turn the club's original owner into a gangster and homicidal sociopath. Also, in a "tribute" to a club associated with breaking racial barriers, there is not a single African American present, aside from a few musicians at other night-spots.

Cafe Society became a victim of the anti-communist witch-hunts during the postwar period. Josephson's brother Leon, a Communist Party member or supporter, was subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947 and refused to testify, becoming the first individual to cite the right to free speech included in the First Amendment. Barney Josephson and the club came under fire from right-wing columnists. Cafe Society Downtown closed its doors the same year, Cafe Society Uptown in 1950. Josephson, who died in 1988, later operated a chain of restaurants in New York.

One of the more notable artistic events that took place at Josephson's club was the debut of the anti-lynching ballad, "Strange Fruit," in early 1939, performed by jazz singer Billie Holiday. The songwriter was Abel Meeropol, under the name Lewis Allan. Meeropol later became better known as the adoptive father of the two sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the Jewish couple who were executed in 1953 for the alleged crime of giving the secret of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union.

As the WSWS explained in 2002, "Meeropol got the song to Barney Josephson, the owner of the club, and asked if Holiday would sing it. By some accounts, Holiday was at first not particularly impressed by the lyrics and perhaps not fully aware of the meaning of the song. Her rendition, however, made an enormous impression. She began performing it nightly, and then recorded it in April of that year."

The moving, disturbing song begins:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit, Blood on the leaves and blood at the root, Black body swinging in the Southern breeze, Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

What does Woody Allen's film, or career at this point, have to do with any of this?