

Clint Eastwood's *The Mule*: The world's oldest drug courier

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Directed by Clint Eastwood; written by Sam Dolnick

Actor and director Clint Eastwood has returned to the screen with a film based on the true story of Leo Sharp, an elderly florist and World War II veteran who ran drugs for the Sinaloa Cartel from the US-Mexican border to Michigan. Sharp's lack of a criminal record and his advanced age made him the perfect courier for years, and his exploits became the stuff of legend within his criminal milieu.

A world-renowned horticulturist, who grew his own unique breeds of flowers, Sharp (born in 1924) had fought in the Italian Campaign in World War II. However, serious financial problems propelled him to become involved in criminal activity. He transported thousands of pounds of cocaine over a period of 10 years, successfully evading law enforcement. In 2011, Sharp was arrested with 200 pounds of cocaine and eventually sentenced to prison. After serving one year, he was released in 2015 due to his poor health and died in 2016, aged 92.

All the elements of an intriguing drama exist in Sharp's story, as well as the opportunity to shed some light on social reality in the United States. What does it say about a society that an old man who has genuine but unwanted or "unprofitable" talents is obliged to become a drug runner in the richest country in the world, one that supposedly reveres and cares for its veteran "heroes"?

Clearly, there is a story here to tell. Unfortunately, official Hollywood got wind of it and, even worse, Clint Eastwood, the hopeless individualist-"libertarian," ended up directing. Now we are left with *The Mule*, a two-hour work that feels less like a film than a propaganda piece for senior citizens who watch too much Fox News.

As the film opens, Earl Stone (based on Sharp and

played by the 88-year-old Eastwood) is shown to be something of a semi-celebrity at a floral convention. As a result, he is too busy to attend his own daughter's wedding. Insulted and hurt, his family essentially disowns him, and this rift forms the dramatic core, such as there is, of *The Mule*. Eastwood blandly explains, "If only Earl had spent more time with his family instead of working all the time!" It only gets worse from there.

Facing home foreclosure due to declining business and with no other apparent options, Earl finds himself offered employment as a driver by a guest at his granddaughter's party. He soon learns that his new bosses at a dubious auto shop want him to take deliveries from the border and back, no questions asked. The individuals in question have guns and are covered with tattoos. They look like something out of a foul Donald Trump campaign ad about "criminal" and "animals" flooding across the border.

In fact, seemingly every Mexican character in *The Mule* has a bandana and a mustache, or at least a cowboy hat and muscles. With all these racist stereotypes, it's not difficult to read the worst into this film.

Meanwhile, the authorities, represented by federal Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents Colin Bates (Bradley Cooper) and Trevino (Michael Peña), are on the trail of the elusive drug smuggler, but have no idea what he looks like. Andy Garcia plays a drug kingpin in what must be the umpteenth time he has impersonated a crime lord or gangster on film.

This is not to say that *The Mule* is an entirely excruciating experience. Eastwood is able to convey some humanity as an old soul woefully out of step with the times, but still living and breathing. There are some amusing bits: For example, he asks his newfound gangster friends how to text on a cell phone. He also

helps a black family on the side of the road change a flat tire and refers to them as “Negroes.” Amusing perhaps, but clichéd all the same.

The film’s denouement finds our hero having to watch out not only for the authorities but also for the gangsters who, unsurprisingly, are no longer as trusting of him as they once were. All the while, family life and personal commitments beckon to him on the road.

Eastwood does not have a critical or insightful word to say about the circumstances that make possible both the drug trade and the massive legal crackdown, including the opportunity for the US to intervene in Latin America in the name of the “war on drugs.”

That is to be expected from the director of the dreadful *American Sniper*, which glorified a sociopath who bragged about shooting at civilians during his military rampage in Iraq.

Immortalized for playing “The Man with No Name” in Sergio Leone’s Westerns, Eastwood is also responsible for the underrated and genuinely anti-war films *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, along with the anti-death penalty *True Crime*. That being said, there was always a decidedly misanthropic streak to his work, in keeping with the spirit of the last 40 or so years of social and cultural reaction.

It may be that Eastwood can only be counted on produce right-wing products like *The Mule*. Then again, nothing is written in stone. He still has some time left.



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