

One Night in Miami: Malcolm X, Cassius Clay, Sam Cooke and Jim Brown in February 1964

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Directed by Regina King; written by Kemp Powers, based on his play.

One Night in Miami is a film directed by Regina King and written by Kemp Powers. It is based on a 2013 play by Powers, adapted for the screen by the playwright.

The night in question is February 24, 1964. Dominating the headlines the next morning would be the news that 22-year-old boxer Cassius Clay had upset Sonny Liston for the heavyweight boxing crown in Miami. A lesser-known incident that night, dramatized in King's film, was the meeting of four significant political and/or cultural figures of the 1960s—Clay, black nationalist leader Malcolm X, singer Sam Cooke and football player Jim Brown—at a segregated Miami hotel for several hours after the fight.

The filmmakers attempt to recreate the discussion that might have taken place between the men that night. The larger purpose of this reimagined conversation is to offer a commentary on the broader situation of African Americans in the 1960s and beyond.

One Night in Miami confronts certain challenges from the outset. Among them is the complexity of the events and personalities of the early and mid-1960s, the limited extent to which the individuals in question understood what was driving their actions and the level of potential confusion introduced by the filmmakers working under conditions today where race is seen as virtually the only significant factor in American life.

The film is stronger about some things than others. To a certain extent, King and her colleagues successfully capture the charisma and power of the personalities involved, aided by the engaging performances of the various actors.

Each of the four men faced a personal or political crossroads of one form or another in early 1964. The first portion of the film tries to establish these dilemmas.

Cooke (Leslie Odom Jr.), possessed of a remarkable singing voice, was attempting to find “crossover” pop appeal as he moved from gospel music towards soul music, while still dealing with largely segregated audiences. He is often credited with “inventing” the soul genre along with Jackie Wilson in the early 1960s, through songs such as “You Send Me,” “Chain Gang,” “I’ll Come Running Back to You” and “Bring It on Home to Me.”

Clay (Eli Goree), before he was more known as Muhammad Ali, was in the process of converting to Islam and joining the national-exclusivist Nation of Islam (NOI), in consultation with Malcolm X (Kingsley Ben-Adir). He was already a successful boxer and a lively public figure, gaining fame for his verbal jousting with members of

the conformist and conservative sports media. By 1967 he would become one of the best known opponents of the Vietnam War, for which he paid a heavy professional and personal price.

Brown (Aldis Hodge) was perhaps the best running back in National Football League history at age 28, a year before he would announce his unexpected retirement in pursuit of film and television acting.

One of the most commendable elements of the film is the seriousness with which it treats certain aspects of Malcolm X's life. By early 1964, he was planning to break with the Nation of Islam, later forming the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU). He was in discussion with Clay about joining the NOI prior to February of that year. According to the filmmakers, his main purpose in going to Miami was to convince Clay to follow him *out* of the NOI.

The filmmakers take some care to demonstrate the enormous stress and physical danger Malcolm X experienced. The FBI is tailing him. The other three men routinely reference his being a “marked man” in their conversations. Scenes treating his wife Betty X (later Betty Shabazz) and their children paint a picture of the harassment and persecution endured by Malcolm at the hands of the capitalist state.

In one scene at the hotel, Malcolm secretly witnesses his NOI bodyguards consulting with the FBI agents shadowing him. The implications of this have since been confirmed in revelations that the FBI and New York Police Department were in fact involved in the political leader's assassination on February 21, 1965, carried out by individuals associated with the NOI.

The film's thematic center emerges in an argument that takes place primarily between Malcolm and Cooke. While urging all three figures to use their “celebrity” in the service of the struggles of African Americans, Malcolm takes sharpest exception to Cooke and the supposed lack of “social depth” in his music. He also criticizes him for trying to appeal to largely “white audiences.”

Cooke replies to this accusation by saying, “The hell I’m not! I got the masters to my songs. I started a label. I’m producing tons of black artists. Don’t you think my determining my creative and business destiny is every bit as inspiring to people as you standing up on a podium and trying to piss them off? Oh, wait a minute, I forgot ... that’s all you do!”

Malcolm responds, “How many times do I have to hear that? That has got to be the greatest fault of you so-called ‘successful Negroes.’ You’ll do something detrimental to your own people with the promise that, after you get rich, then you’ll make it back up to them. With a handout. Some gesture of patronage.”

Further on Malcolm exclaims, “What’s going on around us should

make everyone angry! And you bourgeois Negroes are too happy with your scraps to really understand what's really at stake here!"

Clay tends to side with Malcolm, and Brown tends to side with Cooke, though neither is as inclined to articulate a definite outlook on the issue.

Events reach an angry crescendo when Malcolm lets Clay know he is planning to leave the NOI. Things are left somewhat intentionally unresolved by the filmmakers. The four agree to "move on with the evening" and celebrate Clay's victory. A sense of foreboding lingers as both Malcolm and Cooke would be murdered within the year. As Muhammad X (later Ali) in the NOI, Clay would later disassociate himself from Malcolm prior to the latter's assassination.

While there is intriguing raw material for a complex historical drama in these discussions, the outlook and framework chosen by the filmmakers consciously reduce matters to a choice between two perspectives: black nationalism embodied by Malcolm and Clay or black capitalism represented by Cooke and Brown. Ultimately this simplification and misrepresentation is a serious weakness.

Undoubtedly nationalist and limited political perspectives, to one extent or another, were held by the four men, as they were by many others, workers and intellectuals, in the period, in various forms and iterations. But there was more to the explosive situation than simply the consciousness of these celebrated individuals. Left out is the mass movement for equality taking place under the specific historical conditions of postwar American capitalism, which was influencing or moving these figures, and millions of others, African American and white.

Almost nothing of these giant social struggles and circumstances of the day—above all, the Civil Rights movement—finds expression in the film's dialogue. The 16th Street Baptist Church bombings in Birmingham that killed four school-age girls had occurred only five months earlier. The August 1963 March on Washington and the June 1963 murder of Medgar Evers in Mississippi took place shortly before that. The 1964 Civil Rights Act would be signed into law a little over four months later, in July.

It is nearly impossible to make sense of the protagonists' trajectories if these events are left out. Cooke, for instance, emerged from the gospel music environment of the African American Baptist churches, which were the early musical vehicle for the Civil Rights movement. His most significant song "A Change Is Going to Come"—which he is shown singing on the Johnny Carson show at the end of the film—was a Civil Rights anthem, and consciously written for the movement in January 1964. It is misleading to suggest he was only driven by career and "black-owned" business concerns.

There is in fact only one reference to these events, by Clay in passing. In its own way it is an attempt, perhaps only semi-conscious, to reconcile the interests of black nationalism with black capitalism:

"[Clay]: This ain't about civil rights. Those activists ain't do squat about them four little girls that got bombed in Alabama. That's why they preachin' to a deaf congregation. Cause they ain't giving black people what they really want.

[Cooke]: Which is?

[Clay]: What you have, but take for granted ... Power. Power just means a world where we're safe to be ourselves. To look like we want. Think like we want. Without having to answer to anybody for it. After all we put in, don't black folks deserve that much?"

Frankly, the latter comments in particular largely suggest 2021, not 1964.

Another related weakness is the lack of any serious effort to grapple

with the shifting views of Malcolm X in the last months of his life. His exit from the NOI is presented largely as a personal dispute, over the personal conduct of its leader Elijah Muhammad. But Malcolm was in the process of distancing himself from the separatist and racist nationalist nationalism of the NOI when he was assassinated in February 1965. While not entirely breaking with these views, he was nonetheless clearly grappling with the implications of international and multi-racial revolutionary struggle, evident for instance in his closing remarks at a famous December 1964 debate at the University of Oxford.

The filmmakers' lack of interest or disorientation in regard to the historical and social context ultimately serves to reinforce politically self-serving and reductionist arguments. Neither issues of economic equality, major labor struggles nor even the ideas of Martin Luther King Jr. find expression in the hotel room arguments. Ignoring King, for example, would have been all but impossible at the time, whether one agreed with him or not.

This absence of such questions in *One Night in Miami* reflects much more the outlook of middle-class layers today than it does the actual situation in February 1964. The decision to exclude these elements in the story reflects the impact of the changes that have taken place in the past five and a half decades. There has been a sharp turn to the right within bourgeois politics. The decomposition of the Civil Rights movement by the late 1960s was ultimately followed by the emergence of the obsession with the politics of racial and gender identity in the Democratic Party, along with the rise of a layer of black entrepreneurs, politicians and police chiefs. Richard Nixon's even crasser program of "black capitalism" emerged in the 1970s, to which figures like Jim Brown were early converts.

The African American middle class that has followed this path today feels itself torn between a version of the nationalism that Malcolm X espouses, minus any of its social anger, and the kind of wealth and success represented in only the most limited way by Sam Cooke. Today there are many black multimillionaires. The civil rights struggle and Martin Luther King himself, to a considerable degree, are considered "dated," "dead dogs." A selfish, careerist racialism is very much in fashion.

While there is intriguing and important attention given to the dangers facing oppositional figures such as Malcolm X, one wishes the same level of sensitivity had been devoted to the historical and political context of their lives.



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