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## Fear city new york vs the mafia review

By Dan JacksonPust on 7/28/2020 at 14:38Paul Castellano, successor to the Gambino crime family | NetflixPaul Castellano, sequel to the Gambino family | Netflixin one of the many great scenes from the first season of The Sopranos, New Jersey mob boss Tony Soprano sits down with a group of FBI agents, and they play him a recording that reveals that his mother and his uncle conspired to have him killed. But before he finds out this relevant information, one of the older Italian-American agents, clearly thrilled with the stakes in the meeting, makes an emotional appeal to Tony by emphasizing their shared cultural heritage. Annoyed by the exchange, Tony has a memorable reaction: Why don't you get kumquats out of your mouth and get to fuckin' point? For a number of reasons, Fear City: NYC vs. The Mafia, a three-part Netflix docuseries chronicling the downfall of five prominent New York mob families in the late 70s and 80s, made me wonder how David Chase and the writers of The Sopranos treated the show's FBI stories as the show progressed. More often than not, these plotlines would fade into the background, occasionally frustrating viewers looking for a more conventional narrative of law and order. If you want that story of justice served, Fear City does it out, a secret recording and confessional interview at one point. That means a lot of tough-guy talk from both the authorities and gangsters - some of it entertaining, some of it exhausting. Directed by filmmaker Sam Hobkinson and produced by RAW TV, the company behind Netflix's viral docuseries Don't F\*\*K With Cats, Fear City is more focused on the law enforcement angle than many mob-related sand-crime documentaries. Staging many of the interviews with former agents in cars and diners, the series has a smart look, generating excitement from anecdotes of bug-planting and car-tailing by shooting reenactments about hyper-specific details, like how they discovered a car heat toy was the best place to hide a microphone in a Jaguar. When Fear City gets granulated, luxuriating in the minutia of work, it's at its best. But here's the problem: Fear City may feel ill-suited to its format. With such a great emphasis placed on the scribbling footage itself, which is often presented with bits of text on the screen and images of tape wheels circling, it's easy to imagine these interviews as a podcast, one that might allow some of the interview topics to speak in greater length. (The two gangsters interviewed for the show, Johnny Alite and Michael Franzese, have significant YouTube archives.) Or the series could have been a 90-minute film, one with a tighter focus on either the prosecution, which includes future New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, or the building of the case. Something that would give the far-flung cause a sense of urgency. In its current three-episode form, viewers are asked to sift through too half-baked mythologizing before getting to nitty-gritty nitty-gritty of really fascinating bits of information, like how the Commission actually worked. In addition to relying on some repetitive movie tics, like dropping clips of kitschy TELEVISION commercials to evoke the era, filmmakers use too many interviews that simply rehash the received wisdom of countless crime movies, true-crime shows, and tell-alls. You won't be shocked to hear a gangster talk about his love of champagne or one of the law enforcement agents wax poetic about strange bonds that exist between cops and criminals. Depending on your tolerance for this, your inner Tony Soprano may start asking for them to get to that point. Need help finding something to see? Sign up here for our weekly Streamail newsletter to have streaming recommendations delivered directly to your inbox. Dan Jackson is a senior staff writer at Thrillist Entertainment. He's on Twitter @danieljackson. The most intriguing figure in Fear City: New York vs. The Mafia, the new Netflix documentary about the largest federal investigation into the mob in U.S. history, is not Paul Castellano, the so-called white-collar don who ran the Gambino crime family as a Fortune 500 company. It's not John Gotti, the flashy boss who would later order the hit on Castellano and become a tabloid sensation in the 1980s. Nor is it Rudy Giuliani, then a young U.S. attorney who oversaw the convictions of the heads of family in New York. It's not capos and soldiers giving on-camera interviews. It's not Curtis Silwa who founded the Guardian Angels to fight street violence in his hometown. The most interesting person in Fear City is a man with a leather bag and a penchant for disguise. Introduced just over halfway through the first of the documentary's three parts, Joe Cantamessa was an agent on the FBI's special operations squad with an ability to plant hidden microphones and get through locked doors. And unlike other agents featured in the film, his appearance-in the early 80s, he sported Aviator sunglasses and a lush, shaggy mane-and-behavior he developed as a self-proclaimed bad kid growing up helped him do his job without being noticed. Given that he's bugging the homes of the most powerful gangsters in the five boroughs, that's important. We first meet Cantamessa, who prefers the title Black Bag Man, as he is looking for a way to drop a wire at the home of Angelo Ruggiero, a Gambino family captain who ate quite a bit and spoke quite a bit and seemed like the best starting point for a federal investigation. To do this, Cantamessa is waiting for a legitimate phone problem at Ruggiero's house, calling from the phone company, going into the home and tapping the gangster's line - all the while an unsuspecting employee of Ruggiero sees. Later, Cantamessa is able to implant a recording device in Castellano's Staten Island home by interfering with the chief's TELEVISION signal, and then as a representative of the cable company. It is a plan that would pay dividends that were both salacious and key to building a case. But in Fear City, Cantamessa stories are told with humor and excitement typically reserved for gangsters telling their stories. My mixing technique will depend on the neighborhood, and generally I'm just a local guy who does his job, he says with a buttery grin. The decision to focus on the likes of Cantamessa, other investigators, and the young prosecutors who would end the glory days of the New York mafia is what distinguishes Fear City from other organized crime movies and documentaries. The film shows glimpses of the lifestyle that has been glamorized throughout the media—an early montage talking about cocaine-pushing, disco-era mafiosos wearing polyester waffle-weaving bell bottoms and purple water cologne-and interviews with mob associates John Alite and Michael Franzese help push the story forward. But Fear City skews any glorified retellings of these stories, instead opting for a rarely seen perspective. It's by design, says Jon Liebman, one of the film's executive producers and a former prosecutor who joined the New York U.S. attorney's office shortly after the events covered by the documentary, commonly referred to as the Commission case. To tell the story of the commission's case, you needed to tell the story of how it was put together, which was a collective effort by the FBI and the U.S. attorney's office in New York, to conceptualize the fight and also to investigate it and prosecute it, Liebman says. What makes Fear City compelling isn't just the cat-and-mouse game told from a new vantage point, however. It's a story of two dramatically changing institutions at a crossroads: the city of New York, which had developed a reputation for street violence in the 1970s and was set to undergo a construction boom that would transform its physical and financial landscapes forever; and the FBI, which had struggled to build a case against mob bosses who insulated themselves from guilt. The mafia would find a way to insert itself into skyscraper development via the concrete industry. The FBI and U.S. attorney's office, meanwhile, would figure out how to prosecute the heads of the five families via the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, commonly referred to as RICO. Eventually, the billions of dollars the mob pulled in from construction jobs would become a key piece of evidence in the commission's case, the RICO trial at the center of Fear City, aimed at the heads of the Bonanno, Colombo, Gambino, Genovese, and Lucchese families. The idea of attacking senior management was the most significant contribution from the prosecution's perspective, Liebman said. Instead of arresting and prosecuting lower-level people who were out on the streets committing crimes, this case was about going after the bosses. And the message to the whole mafia is if you can get the bosses, you can get some. They were not If Fear City has a star beyond Black Behind Man, it's director Sam Hobkinson who captures the grit of 70s and 80s New York without sacrificing the highly stylized brilliance that makes so many Netflix true-crime docs pop. Hobkinson draws on unprecedented access to surveillance tapes and photos and reveals important information through fragments of conversations between gangsters and reenactments that manage to improve the story, rather than degrade it. This pulls the viewer in, making them witness the growing mountain of evidence against bosses and the dramatically growing scope of the investigation without bogging them down into legalese. I hope people enjoy the ride, but also understand the complexity and audacity of putting these cases together, Liebman says. I hope people can appreciate the complexity and boldness of the people involved. So what do you need to consume before (or after) Fear City? Ringer has put together a syllabus to help guide you through the documentary, the top of the New York mob, and beyond. The Conversation The Godfather lords the mafia genre as Don makes his capos. But in the case of Fear City, Hobkinson says another 1970s Francis Ford Coppola classic served as a touchstone: The Conversation, which tells the story of a surveillance expert grappling with the effects of his job. Gene Hackman stars as the best son of a bitch on the West Coast. Harry Caul, who has signed on to record a conversation between a young couple in a San Francisco park. It quickly becomes clear that the content of his ties can put people's lives at risk. Caul, who had previously kept his distance from his work, becomes involved in the case, eventually uncovering a truth that threatens to destroy him. Now 46 years old. The Conversation is still an intriguing character study whose message has far outlived much of the technology that featured in it. It's also still a technical marvel from the opening telephoto shot to the virtuosic sound mix. Its influence on Fear City shines through most during an early scene in which Harry edits tape, revealing a new layer to the pair's discussion with each play, just as the endless loop of wiseguy tapes help bring the case against the commission into focus. Baby Huey and Baby Sitters, Hard Times Hard Times, which serves as the opening theme for Fear City, has been a grill for hip-hop producers for decades. You don't have to look past its opening four bars, with pounding drums and an ominous bass line, to see why it's been sampled by the likes of A Tribe Called Quest, Ghostface Killah, and The Game. But even without these interpretations, Hard Times stands on its own as a forgotten psych-soul classic-even if one that comes with a tragic story. James Ramsey, an Indiana-born singer who recorded under the name Baby Huey, was discovered in 1969 after performing for Donny Hathaway and Curtis Mayfield. The latter signed Ramsey and his band to his Curtom label, and in of the next year wrote and the songs that would include the debut Baby Huey album. Hard Times is the standout, but the pulsating fuzz of Running and gritty covers by California Dreamin' and Mighty are also must-listen. Unfortunately, Ramsey wouldn't live to see the songs' release: By the end of 1970, his weight had eclipsed 400 pounds, and he had developed an addiction to heroin. On October 15 of that year, he was found dead in a Chicago motel room at the age of 26. In 1971 Curtom released The Baby Huey Story: The Living Legend. Nearly five decades later, the album and Hard Times are still finding acolytes. Don't Fuck With Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer The producers of Fear City had a breakout Netflix hit late last year centered on a completely different kind of investigative documentary. The three-part Don't Fuck With Cats focuses on a small group of private citizens who stumble upon a video of a depraved person killing kittens and searching for the truth. What follows is a grim tale involving internet detective work and the murder of a Chinese international student studying in Toronto. Under these stories, however, Don't Fuck With Cats explores our relationship with social media, celebrity lust and the quest for justice. It's a deeply disturbing watch, but a must-see for true-crime fans and anyone fascinated by the power certain individuals can wield. Giuliani Time Fear City ends with a short clip of Rudy Giuliani winning the 1993 mayoral election in New York. Lifted in part by his work on the commission's case. He would help usher in a new era for the city, a more cosmopolitan, glossy, and corporate one than the decades that preceded it. His two terms weren't exactly idyllic, however: From the broken-windows theory style of policing he supported to the defunding of public school systems to a litany of civil lawsuits filed against his administration, his policies didn't benefit all New Yorkers. In the 2006 documentary Giuliani Time explores the more fraught side of his time in office, including the 1999 killing of Guinean immigrant Amadou Diallo by plain clothes cops and a 1997 incident in which NYPD officers brutalized and sexually assaulted a Haitian man named Abner Louima. (The documentary gets its name from Louima's claim that the officers shouted the phrase shortly before he was attacked; Louima recalled that part of the story, even though the attack on him was very real.) While Giuliani Time feels unfocused in parts, it's a crucial look at the man who was once dubbed America's Mayor, as well as the city he ran. Five Families: The Ride, Decline, and Resurgence of America's Most Powerful Mafia Empires, Selwyn Raab By focusing on investigators and prosecutors, Fear City doesn't provide much background for the lives of mafia figures at the center of the investigation. For completists, there's Selwyn Raab's 2005 book exploring the history of organized crime in America, the mob families targeted in the Commission case and how since the mid-1980s. It's long, the 10th anniversary edition is nearly 800 pages, but it's a strictly reported and researched text that avoids the conspiracy-heavy approach of so many similar books. All the big names, from Gotti to Gravano to Castellano, are represented in five families, but Raab also gives life to the rise and fall of the little criminals who surrounded them. By telling their stories, along with those of the people who helped bring down the commission, Raab's book is among the most complete texts about the mafia that have ever been produced. GangsterBB Maybe you don't like your mafia history strictly reported and researched. In that case, I'd like to introduce you to an internet forum full of amateur Selwyn Raabs. GangsterBB-specifically its organized crime - Real Life subforum-is a place where a thread titled Why the mob war in Montreal can be far from stretching over in seven years and 104 pages, and where users debate about the current protests calling for police reform and defunding will lead to a new rise in the mafia. GangsterBB residents also seem to have a lot of info: This thread about the Patriarca crime family from Providence, Rhode Island, has data on the mob's local recruitment pool in the 1980s, and how many doing ceremonies have been held in New England in the past few decades. (RI had one in 97 for a few guys. Whether it was recognized by all 5 families depends on who you talk to.) Is all this just rumors and fanfic? Who's to say? But it is very fun for anyone who wants to kill a few hours to read about the mafia. (H/t to Nick Usen, my personal guru for all things modern-mob related, to put me on this one.) The Sopranos, Mr. Ruggiero's Neighborhood All The Sopranos is required viewing, for everyone from mafia buffs to prestige TV connoisseurs to people who just want to understand the recent rash of memes. But the opening episode of Season 3 is especially germane to Fear City. Mr. Ruggiero's Neighborhood breaks from the series convention and puts Tony and his family in the background, instead focusing on F.B.I. agents who try to bug his house. There's a lot of humor packed in the hour-The Tony sings Dirty Work, AJ being referred to as Little Bing by FBI agents, tennis instructor who takes a special interest in Adriana-as well as a little bit of camp. (Mashup of I'll Be Missing You and Peter Gunn's theme is a little too much, even in a pre-Girl Talk world.) It's not among the show's finest episodes, but it's certainly unforgettable. It also connects back to Fear City on a deeper level: The Mr. Ruggiero in question is Tony's plumber, who arrives after the Soprano household's water heater explodes; in fact, it is almost certainly a reference to Angelo Ruggiero, a reputed Gambino family associate whose house was bugged early in the investigation of the five families. Of course, Tony fares a little better on the surveillance front, thanks to an assist from The key figure in the Commission's case were not successful. Sign up for the Ringer newsletter

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