

Review: Mid90s

2018-10-30 20:00:00 by [Chris Compendio](#)

A pretty good coming-of-age movie that you've probably seen before

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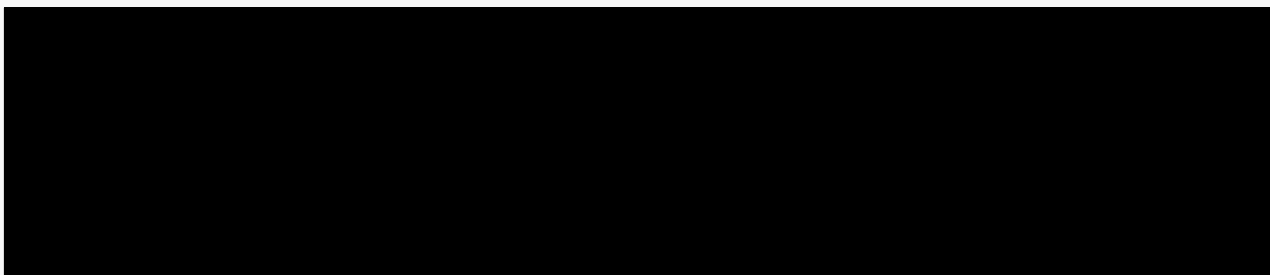
I have very distinct memories of my 12 years attending an all-boys school in the Philadelphia suburban area and though it's a radically different scenario than what is presented in Jonah Hill's directorial debut *Mid90s*, I couldn't help but think back to that experience. For that long chunk of my life, I was surrounded by young boys aspiring to be masculine in a quite short-sighted manner. That is one of several themes and throughlines in *Mid90s*, which acts as Hill's ode to 1990s Los Angeles, skate culture, hip-hop, and the struggles of adolescence.

It's a familiar tale, and anyone who's ever followed the indie movie scene for however long has undoubtedly seen films of its ilk before. Despite its familiarity, and what I felt was an abrupt ending, I found myself drawn to how it depicted dynamics between youths, familial dysfunction, and abusive relationships. *Mid90s* is also an excellent showcase for 13-year old lead actor Sunny Suljic, who the gaming community will recognize as Atreus from *God of War*. The boy's got a bright future ahead.

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Mid90s

Director: Jonah Hill

Release Date: October 19, 2018 (Limited)

Rating: R

Stevie (Suljic) isn't in the best family environment. While he has an affectionate relationship with his single mother Dabney (Katherine Waterston), he is frequently subjected to physical and verbal abuse from his hot-headed older brother Ian (Lucas Hedges). It isn't until he observes a group of skater kids that Stevie is inspired to go a different direction, away from his unsatisfactory domestic life.

Despite the prominence of 90s L.A. skating culture in the film's plot, it isn't the primary focus of the story. It's a vehicle for Stevie's coming of age story and a great and convenient visual way to track his progress as he weaves his way deeper into the social circles of this sub-culture. Hill shot the film in 16mm, with the image having a grainy quality to it and the aspect ration being a boxy 4:3, which at first seems like a way-too-obvious method to make the film look "vintage," but is justified by the final scene.

Long story short, Jonah Hill proves that he knows how to direct a film with *Mid90s*. The visuals and editing were deliberate punchy, and complimented decently with a well-curated soundtrack and a musical score composed by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross; it's a brighter and optimistic score from their usual darker David Fincher fare. Despite the story itself delving into some familiar tropes, the acting, dialogue, and overall characterization as written and directed by Hill is what gave this film some added texture.



I'm willing to bet that most Americans, regardless of East Coast or West Coast, will find at least some of the loosest and basic parallels with their childhood friend groups and the group of skater boys in *Mid90s*. Stevie is brought on by Ruben (Gio Galicia), who comes across as the most guarded and insecure one of the group. "I smoke, I fuck bitches," this little kid tells Stevie. We see his exterior begin to peel off when Stevie goes against some of his pieces of advice and wins the approval of his peers, like the timid filmmaker "Fourth Grade" (Ryder McLaughlin), the impulsive (and occasionally self-destructive) "Fuckshit" (Olan Prenatt), and Ray (Na-keel Smith), the de facto leader, who is not only the most skilled skater of them all, but the most mature of the group.

We liken adolescence to a time where "things were simpler" with fewer cares in the world, but this film really goes into the heart of complex social dynamics between younger folk. I felt like every combination of the characters amongst the skater group had a distinct relationship to track through the film, and Hill crafts them with a subtlety that allows them to organically evolve. It felt more restrained than something you'd see from a Harmony Korine film, but the loose, natural dialogue did have shades of *Kids* and *Gummo*. I didn't realize this until reading up on the film after watching it, but Korine did indeed make a cameo as a one-night stand for Stevie's mother.

Speaking of, my comment on every combination having their own little arc also applies to Stevie's family. Waterston comparatively doesn't have too much screen time as Dabney, but there was still much to extrapolate from our time with her. We see Stevie lying down on his floor, his mother on his bed, as the two are shown to have regular, presumably enjoyable and profound conversations; she looks the other way even though she is uncertain of her son's new crowd, which is all mostly silently conveyed, and she only intervenes when a certain threshold is crossed. With Hedges as Ian, there is always a storytelling difficulty in painting abusive characters as too sympathetic, but the way Ian is handled feels realistic, and the character is more multi-faceted than I expected.



Under the layer of the coming-of-age story is another throughline of a cycle of abuse. It isn't exactly said per se, but Dabney was not always the motherly figure she presents herself now, according to Ian —there's an implied abuse, or at the very least, harmful negligence towards Ian by Dabney before Stevie was born. It's evident that Ian's aggressiveness towards his younger brother stems from both the damage brought on by their mother and a resentment for the better treatment that Stevie is receiving. But despite his tough exterior and his displays of machismo, there is a brief and shocking moment of vulnerability, where verbal jabs from Stevie have a major effect. I'm someone who thinks that we've seen too much Lucas Hedges lately, but I was welcoming towards this very different performance.

Mid90s depicted abusive relationships quite realistically—despite some shocking images (not to mention the sound effects every time Ian may beat his brother), you see that their relationship still forces a co-dependency on each other. Stevie is still obligated to give a birthday gift to his older brother, he still asks him for help (though the advice is often questionable), and you watch the two play PlayStation and Super Nintendo games together. Going with my earlier claim that the ending felt too abrupt, likewise, I also felt that this story thread wrapped up too cleanly.

At the center, the film is about the need for acceptance, and Sunny Suljic displays so much maturity in his performance as a kid maneuvering his way into this skate group—it starts off as observation, then nervousness and uncertainty when he makes it into the circle. There are a whole lot of close-ups of his face, and I don't remember the last time I saw a young performer express glee, confusion, strife, and sometimes a certain darkness as effortlessly as Suljic. He definitely has less to say than he does in *God of War*, and it is clear from the get-go just how valuable a tool his facial expressions are for conveying emotion. It helps that the rest of the performers for this skater group, who I found out later were mostly composed of real-life skaters and non-professional actors, add a special kind of authenticity and genuineness.



Despite my praise, I'm unsure exactly how to score this film. Having gone to some independent film festivals, particularly Sundance two years in a row, there was a point where I felt like I was watching too-similar films again and again, and the internal reviewer in my head ended up frizzled because I had a hard time distinguishing different indies with overlapping themes. Even though I can't spout too many titles off the top of my head that provoke this feeling of *deja vu* (the only ones I can think of is one called *As You Are*, and maybe even *Dope*) I felt like I'd seen this type of movie before.

Heck, I feel like I've even seen 90s nostalgia like this too. The aforementioned *Dope*, while it had a different energy and didn't actually take place in the 90s, was full of 90s-ness. This film is filled with familiar posters, vintage game consoles, CD cases and covers, and a scene where Ian is straight-up wearing a Bill Clinton rubber mask, in case you somehow forgot what decade you were in. If you're already suffering from 1980s fatigue, at least the decade after is ripe for the picking. Pretty soon, we'll have a resurgence of mainstream films like *The To-Do List*.

But that's too much of a tangent, I suppose. I hesitate to give the film too high a score because I don't think it will relate to everyone who will see it—I found it very special and relatable mainly based on my own experiences grappling and struggling with concepts involving masculinity, abuse, and social acceptance. This is a male-dominated film, and while there are characters who feel very real, their relatability will vary in different degrees depending on who you ask and what experiences they had. I will say, however, that the movie is entertaining and funny at times, and even so, Jonah Hill shows promise as a storyteller—he's definitely matured from *Superbad*.



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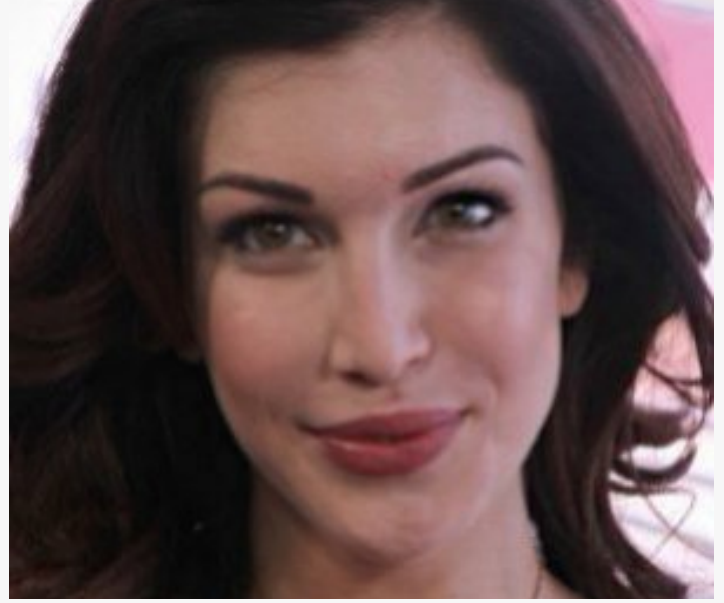
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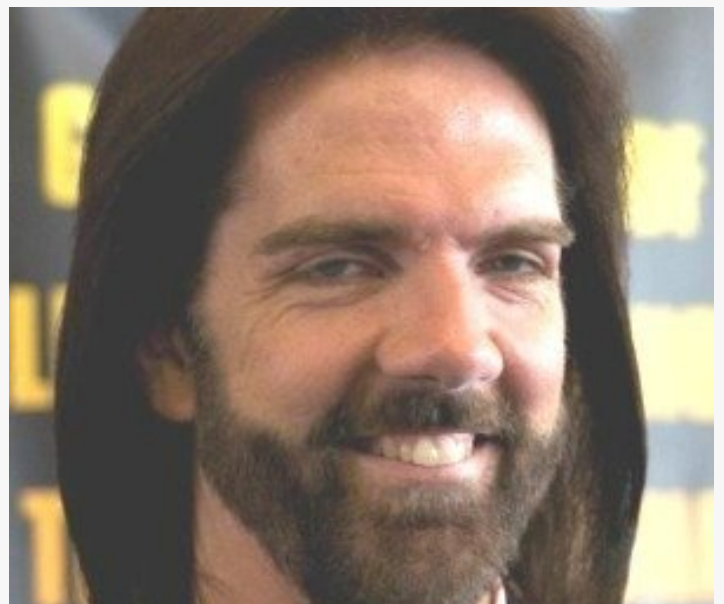
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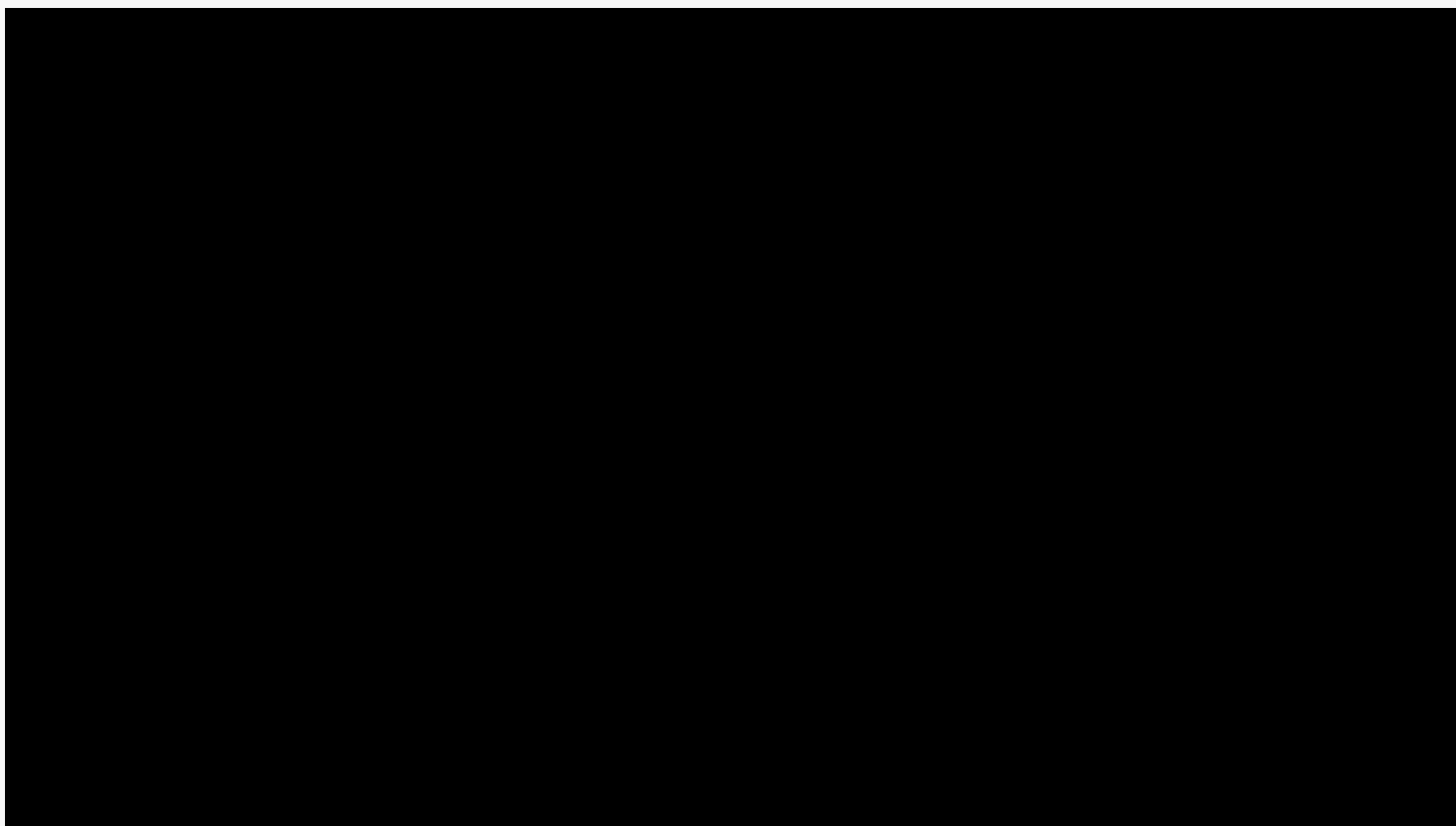
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Chris Compendio is one too many Chris's (Chrises?) writing for Flixist and Destructoid. They are a massive MCU fan who also writes and podcasts for Marvel News Desk, and a Nintendo fanatic who wr... [more + disclosures](#)

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Review: The Assistant

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Corporate America is an exceptionally terrible place to find individualism. After decades of systemic abuse and routine overworking going unreported, we're finally starting to learn the truth about how employers mistreat their employees to help save a few pennies. This kind of demoralizing, soul-crushing labor has infected

plenty of different industries, but it was swept under the rug by most involved until some key people started talking out against it.

The Assistant is shining a light on this very broken system. It doesn't give a clear message or even give a call of action, but instead just accurately recreates what a typical day in the life of an overworked, undervalued, and often forgotten employee is like in modern society. It sucks, to put it bluntly.

Thankfully, the film doesn't suck, though I wouldn't call it an easy watch.

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