# Ryan Coogler’s Sinners blends horror and history to explore the Black American experience



Director Ryan Coogler continues to expand his exploration of the Black experience in America with his latest film, Sinners, which debuted in theatres over the weekend. Known for his impactful works such as Fruitvale Station, the Creed franchise, and Black Panther, Coogler now turns to the Jim Crow era, presenting a gripping horror narrative that intertwines historical realities with supernatural elements.

Set in Clarksville, Mississippi, Sinners follows Sammie, a young guitar talent played by newcomer Miles Caton, who yearns to break free from his preacher father’s shadow and the confines of their family church to pursue playing the blues for broader audiences. Sammie’s opportunity arrives when his twin cousins—both portrayed by Michael B. Jordan—open a juke joint in their hometown. Their venture is financed by illicit profits from their time working with Al Capone’s organised crime syndicate in Chicago.

The juke joint grand opening attracts the hardworking community of sharecroppers, offering them a rare moment of joy and catharsis. However, the celebration takes a dark turn with the arrival of three white vampires who target the Black patrons, an intentional juxtaposition by Coogler highlighting racial tensions and historical oppression.

The film delves deeply into the Great Migration, a significant movement of Black Americans from the segregated rural South to urban centres in the North and West during the early 20th century. Coogler described in an interview with The Guardian that this period, when millions contemplated fleeing the South en masse, is a personal obsession for him and a critical backdrop for the film.

From 1910 to 1940, nearly two million Black southerners left for cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and New York, leading to cultural renaissances such as the Harlem Renaissance. For many from Mississippi, Chicago was the destination, accessed via the Illinois Central Railroad. Yet, as Sinners reflects, the migration did not guarantee freedom from racism, with cities like Chicago offering only different manifestations of segregation and prejudice. Early in the film, Sammie idealises Chicago as a place of tolerance and autonomy, but his cousins swiftly dispel this notion, remarking, “Chicago ain’t shit but tall buildings instead of plantations.”

In another poignant narrative thread, Sinners references Black towns established as safe havens during this era. The film brings up a nearby town embraced by Black residents as a utopia but tempers this with scepticism, alluding to historical tragedies such as the destruction of Tulsa’s Black Wall Street and other Black communities decimated by white supremacist violence or eminent domain.

Coogler’s story frames the experiences of its characters through stark, often brutal choices shaped by systemic racism. For Sammie, the choices are bleak: remain in the oppressive environment of the South and face continual hardship or survive with the burden of guilt. Smoke, one of the twins, grapples with confronting white supremacy while alive or seeking genuine freedom and familial wholeness only in the afterlife. Delta Slim, a revered local blues musician portrayed by Delroy Lindo, navigates the painful realities of Jim Crow, often seeking solace in alcohol. The supernatural clash between the Black townspeople and the white vampires symbolises a choice between spiritual solidarity and physical subjugation.

The juke joint’s opening night, where much of the story’s climax unfolds, serves as a metaphor for Black resilience and the ability to find joy amid adversity. The film culminates in a memorable supernatural party scene that unites Black revelers across generations, illustrating a tradition of joy as a form of resistance. Observing this, the film echoes contemporary reflections on Black communal celebrations, as noted by former New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow, who observed on social media how “fans have replaced the signs, and joy has replaced the rage,” highlighting Black Americans’ focus on healing through community in challenging times.

Sammie’s reflection on the events of that night—calling it both the best and worst night of his life—encapsulates the essence of the Black American experience as portrayed by Coogler: a persistent negotiation between moments of happiness and the harsh realities of systemic oppression.

Sinners stands as a significant addition to Coogler’s body of work, embedding historical context within the horror genre to present a visceral and nuanced portrayal of the Black experience during one of America’s most turbulent periods. The Guardian is reporting.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)