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Cabin in the Sky (1943), from start to finish, is a gem of a musical

Description

Written and reviewed by Larry Gleeson

Cabin in the Sky, another classic film from the 2025 TCM 31 Days of Oscar, directed by Vincente Minelli, is based on a jazz and blues-influenced, musical play with book by Lynn Root, lyrics by John Latouche and music by Vernon Duke. With an all-black cast the film is very dynamic with elements of folklore and spiritual themes. The film came out in 1943. Most all black cast films were known as â??race films.â?• With the Production Code of 1930 in full force, most race films had to have music, religion, and down-home characters. In *Cabin in the Sky*, the Production Code would not give approval due to the character of Georgia Brown. The character was toned down. Lena Horne, a jazz singer, actress, civil rights activist and one of the first black performers to be signed by a major studio, portrays Georgia Brown.

The story revolves around Little Joe, portrayed by a comedian from the Jack Benny radio show, Eddie â??Rochesterâ?• Anderson. Little Joe is a compulsive gambler with a devoted and religious wife, Petunia. Petunia is portrayed by Ethel Waters, a well-known Broadway singer. In addition, Waters was the second African American to be nominated for an Academy Award, the first African American to star on her won television show, and the first African American nominated for a Primetime Emmy. Petunia wants Joe to repent and be saved by Reverend Green, at the upcoming evening service.

The church is full and the congregation breaking into song as they work themselves up into religious fervor. It is a sight and sound to behold. As repentance begins, Petunia nudges Joe to go on up. Joe isnâ??t there. Petunia believes Joe has already go up to be saved for his sins. But three hustling

polecats distracted Joe, who is now outside the church being coerced into a dice game with Domino Johnson, another nerâ?? do well. Joe tries to plea heâ??s given up gambling for Petuniaâ??s sake. But when the hustlers tell Joe, heâ??ll be rolling with their money, their dice, and that Georgia Brown would be there, Joe seems to lose his will power and is dragged off to the dice game.

At the dice game, Joe loses all the money and is deeply indebted. Joe gets shot and as he lays on his deathbed The Devil and his â??coal heaversâ?• have come for Joe. Petunia gets on her knees bedside and prays to God and several of heavenâ??s soldiers appear to do battle for Joeâ??s soul. God decides to give Joe six months to turn his life around. But the Devil has given Joe a 1-A classification. This is where the film really gets interesting. New characters are introduced including Louis â??Satchmoâ?• Armstrong, one of the most influential figures in Jazz history with such classics as â??Hello Dolly,â?• â??Itâ??s a Wonderful World,â?• and â??Dream a Little Dream of Me,â?• among many others. Armstrong is playing the trumpet at the private Hades Hotel Idea Dept., and his cohorts start dancing and clapping when suddenly Lucifer, Jr. (Rex Ingram) comes in and chastises them under the guise of office efficiency.

It doesnâ??t take the Idea Dept. long to come up with a way to get Joeâ??s soul. Joe wins the Irish sweepstakes. Lucifer, Jr., sends Georgia Brown to tempt Joe. In a misunderstanding with Petunia Joe goes off with Georgia Brown and is living fast. In a spectacular nightclub scene with Duke Ellington and his Jazz Orchestra, trombone player J.J. Johnson engages the crowd in a one-of-a-kind call and response number. Petunia shows up in a glittering gown and wants half of the money Joe won. Georgia Brown wants a cut, too, and Domino Johnson has come for Joe as well.

Not giving away the ending, suffice to say *Cabin in the Sky* is an enormously entertaining film. The costuming, set designs, acting, the narrative, and the choreography are special as they are spectacular. The song and dance numbers are fluid and full of vim and verve. Lena Horne, as Georgia Brown, is vivacious with her voice and look. There might be one or two moments where the audience can catch a breather. From start to finish, *Cabin in the Sky* is a gem. Highly recommended.

Category

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