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AMERICAN BABYLON

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A Court TV release of an RS production in association with Court TV. Produced by David Heilbroner, Robert Stone. Executive producer, Anthony Horn.

Directed by Robert Stone. Camera (color, 16mm), Stone; editor, Kate Davis; music, Joel Harrison; sound, David Heilbroner; sound designer, Paul Hsu. Reviewed at Sunset Screening Room, L.A., May 30, 2000. Running time: 86 MIN.

With: Jeff Fauntleroy, Lonell Jones.

By ROBERT KOEHLER

Embracing all the strengths and weaknesses of cinema verite, Robert Stone's "American Babylon" observes the supposedly new and improved Atlantic City, N.J., and finds a bizarrely schizoid burg starkly divided between thriving haves and desperate have-nots. Though current pic's interest is in the predominantly black ghetto left behind in the city's urban renewal, that focus grows increasingly inconsistent over the course of a docu that's at least one-third too long. Early, limited summer release will place pic out of the theatrical chips, but eventual air-dates on Court TV will give cabler something to show opposite similar fare on HBO.

Something about the Jersey beach resort brings forth nothing but melancholy when put on the bigscreen; although the casino capital Stone finds is physically quite different from the place captured decades earlier by Bob Rafelson ("The King of Marvin Gardens") and Louis Malle ("Atlantic City"), the same glitzy emptiness persists.

Opening montage of demolition of decaying Atlantic City buildings suggests a more sardonic tone than the docu actually adopts, as it puts the viewer in the passenger seat beside narcotics detective Jeff Fauntleroy, who describes the town not as the title's Babylon, but as the biblical promised land of Canaan. This is an early hint of Fauntleroy's born-again Christian faith, which he sees as one and the same with his police work. As he drives to make a nighttime arrest, Fauntleroy summarizes his work as "being in the devil's dungeon."

In a manner strongly recalling the Maysles brothers' masterpiece "Salesman" (1969), Stone's handheld camera follows Fauntleroy during days and nights, offering no judgment or commentary as he playfully shadowboxes while chanting Baptist church-style with his unidentified teenage son or snoops around some of the projects for evidence of drug dealing. The officer



BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY: *The documentary "American Babylon" centers on Las Vegas cops Jeff Fauntleroy, right, and Lonell Jones.*

reveals to the camera that he nearly descended into a life of crime but managed to discipline himself and join the police department — noting that he ended up arresting some of his boyhood pals.

But Stone fails to press Fauntleroy on how he managed to turn his life around when so many of his peers did not — in essence, failing to probe what makes his central subject tick. To be sure, the camera observes the cop as streetwise, hip, witty, deeply religious, a loving family man, patient in the face of merciless taunting from street punks and supremely dedicated to his work. But it is never clear (a weakness of verite-style pics) when Fauntleroy is playing to the camera, and it's never clear where the key to the man's soul lies.

As if growing tired of the cop's relentless grind, docu cuts away from time to time to the shimmering casinos a few blocks from the ghetto, recording fairly pointless moments of the pre-show and pageant of the most recent Miss America contest, in progress during an oncoming hurricane and a musician's strike. The intended contrast, though, is so obvious that it acts like a rude appendage to pic's concerns. Indeed, Stone's repetitive shots framing shanties with palatial hotel-casinos become a supreme irritant, pushing the verite approach into agitprop.

Fauntleroy's only pal on the force, Lonell Jones, is also observed in action, but even a crisis scene in which he investigates a suicide attempt reveals little of Jones' character. Fauntleroy's first Sunday sermon to his Baptist congregation puts a happy bow on pic, and it seems that the camera has finally caught this man in a life-altering moment.

Pic would have benefited from more disciplined editing and a paring down to a TV-friendly hour length. Lensing is suitably grainy and mobile, handled by Stone as his own operator with mucho courage in the tough hoods.