

The coolest guy in town

Ice Cube takes on another day in 'First Sunday' BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Is Ice Cube melting? After making his name in the hardest of rap groups — N.W.A., a band with lyrics so ferocious that the FBI came calling — Cube has morphed into a movie star who can deliver mainstream films like “Are We Done Yet?” and “Barbershop” alongside raunchy hits like his “Friday” films.

But for the 38-year-old rapper, actor and movie producer, who has a record of profitable films most Hollywood honchos would kill for, the message of a sweet-natured family movie like “First Sunday,” opening Jan. 11, is oddly the same as the lyrics of his 2006 hit single “Why We Thugs”: When the bad overshadows the good, doing the right thing isn't so easy. “No doubt,” says Cube, when asked if he gets the same word out in different ways. He doesn't worry much about projecting a specific toughness or attitude for himself, just about hitting the message.

“I'm not conscious about image as far as my image, but I am conscious about what I'm going to be proud of,” says Cube, who was born O'Shea Jackson in South Central but legally changed his name to the cooler Ice Cube.

With “First Sunday,” Cube, a father of four in real life, is proud of playing Durell, a dad who takes an active role in raising the son he had with an ex-girlfriend. He walks the boy to school every day and ultimately decides, in desperation, to rob a church with his buddy LeeJohn (Tracy Morgan) so that his son doesn't have to move to Atlanta with his mom for financial reasons, and thus slip out of his dad's life.

“It's funny, but it touches on social commentary,” says Cube, whose hit films range from the Cheech & Chong-like pot comedies “Friday,” “Next Friday” and “Friday After Next” to action dramas like “Torque” and “Three Kings.” “It's ripe for the time, speaking on the church, and what it owes to the community that's made them what they are.”

When Durell and LeeJohn break into the church, they find themselves unintentionally taking hostages, including a preacher (Chi McBride), a soulful, caring parishioner (Loretta Devine) and characters ranging from the flamboyant choir director to an ambitious deacon and the preacher's daughter. Will the church leave the rough neighborhood for the greener pastures of the suburbs? And has someone already ripped off the church before Durell and LeeJohn showed up?

“With a movie like this, you owe it to both audiences — the heavily religious audience and the people who are skeptical — you owe it to them to have a happy ending. You're walking a fine line, robbing a church,” Cube says of the plot's most outrageous twist. “A very fine line.”

He's laughing, but one of Cube's appeals is that even when delivering the hardest of raps or playing the toughest of characters (like his breakthrough role of Doughboy in 1991's “Boyz n the Hood”), he maintains an essential likability. And when he's playing the mildest of dads in one of his family comedies, he never seems like a pushover.

Certainly there's no fine line to worry about when making a film with him and his production company, Cubevision: His history is that he can be counted on to turn a profit for all involved.

“People who are smart kind of let us do our thing,” says Cube. “I keep saying that because I want studio executives to read this.

The ones that are smart let us do our thing. We bring back a great movie and never go over budget, and everyone's happy at the end of the day.”

With the unquestioned broad appeal of movies centered on black casts like Cube's films (such as this year's holiday hit “This Christmas”), there should be little hesitation about telling these stories.

“What [Hollywood] has realized is that black people still go to the movies more than anybody else,” says Cube. “A lot of other people are putting entertainment systems in their house and movies aren't an outing for them. But for us, movies are still an outing. [Studios] realize it's a viable dollar and more movies should cater to the people that are going to the movies.”

Cube certainly does, and his own movies have been met with exceptional success. His production company is growing; he's excited about his Internet TV site, www.uvntv.com. And with the “Friday” comedies and now “First Sunday,” it looks like he's planning to take over the entire week.

“I got my eye on Saturday,” laughs Cube, “but we ain't got a script yet.” ♦

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Ice Cube and Tracy Morgan are friends whose plan to rob a church runs into some unexpected hurdles in “First Sunday.”

