

NEW FROM **NEW YORKER FILMS**

Frances McDormand    Kate Beckinsale    Christian Bale    Natascha McElhone    and    Alessandro Nivola

**"SUPERBLY ACTED! ...FURTHER EVIDENCE OF FRANCES MCDORMAND'S EXCEPTIONAL DRAMATIC RANGE... SHE EMITS THE SPARKS OF A SULTRY SCREEN SIREN."**

-Stephen Holden, THE NEW YORK TIMES



**"SEXUAL TENSION IS EVERYWHERE! LANGUID, RICH IN COLOR AND LIGHT AND DELICIOUSLY SENSUAL!"**

-Loren King, CHICAGO TRIBUNE

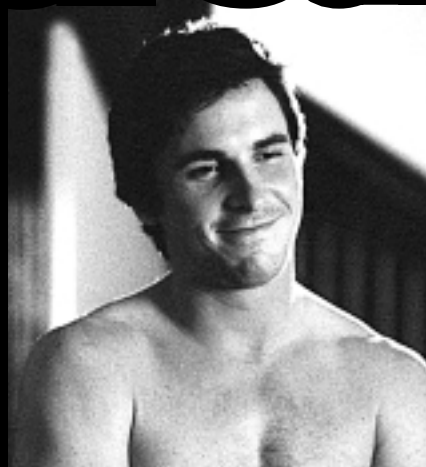
# Laurel Canyon



(HIGHEST RATING!)

**THIS JUICILY LOADED FILM IS BETTER THAN THE BUZZ!"**

-David Elliott,  
SAN DIEGO UNION TRIBUNE



**Written and Directed by Lisa Cholodenko**

A rigorously honest exploration of the seduction of innocence by experience, and of relationships between people with wildly divergent world views – a freewheeling Los Angeles record producer (Frances McDormand) and her uptight son (Christian Bale as a psychiatric resident).

USA • 2003 • 103 mins • Color • In English

# An Aging Hippie, Making Both Love and War

STEPHEN HOLDEN

**L**eonine in T-shirt and jeans, her frizzy, blondish hair streaming below her shoulders, Frances McDormand in "Laurel Canyon" may be the ultimate screen embodiment of a recently evolved species: Rock 'n' Roll Woman of a Certain Age.

Her character, Jane Bentley, is a pot-smoking, Champagne-swilling, free-loving Los Angeles record producer pushing 50 whose walls are plastered with platinum and gold records. That Ms. McDormand is as comfortable and convincing as an aging rock sybarite as she was playing the worrywart mother of a teenage rock fan in "Almost Famous" is further evidence of her exceptional dramatic range. It's encouraging to see this handsome, dimpled-chin actress, who at 45 does not fit the prototype of a pneumatic Hollywood babe, emit the sparks of a sultry-eyed screen siren.

Through much of the film, which opens today in New York, Jane is hard at work (and at play) completing an album with a British rock band whose members are a decade and a half younger than she. Jane, who has a history of sleeping with the musicians she produces, is seriously involved with the band's lead singer, Ian (Alessandro Nivola), a sexual athlete with a sly smile and carnivorous eyes who relishes luring third parties into bed with them. Jane, who has loved women as well as men, doesn't mind a bit.

As she sashays around her luxurious home (which houses her recording studio) in the rugged, woodsy Los Angeles nook known as Laurel Canyon, a composite image of the 70's pop goddesses Joni Mitchell and Carole King comes to mind. The character may be more than a decade younger than those legends are today, but Ms. McDormand's Jane is a dead-on personification of a proud, post-hippie roustabout who is not about to be anybody's doormat. The hedonistic world through which she prowls is photographed with a sensual eye that portrays the neighborhood as an intoxicating lotus land whose resident voluptuaries greedily savor the delights of their little paradise.

"Laurel Canyon" was written and directed by Lisa Cholodenko, whose finely observed 1998 film "High Art" starred Ally Sheedy as a high-strung, heroin-sniffing New York art photographer with resemblances to Nan Goldin. Even though her new movie shamelessly fudges the era (its folk-rock-flavored music feels more late 1970's and early 80's than today's harder-edged hip-hop), it reconfirms the filmmaker's talent as an acutely observant chronicler of upscale bohemian subcultures.

While celebrating the accomplishments of successful, creative women who live by their own rules, neither movie turns a blind eye to the downside of such autonomy. If Jane is smart, sexy, talented, rich and refreshingly honest, she can also be overbearing, arrogant and insensitive. How much longer she can remain a player in this youth-oriented culture is anybody's guess, but time seems to be running out fast. Jane, by her own admission, was a neglectful mother to her now-grown son, Sam (Christian Bale), whose childhood wounds still smart, and beneath her bravado is an undercurrent of guilt.

The heart of the film is the generational clash between Jane and Sam (the grown-up product of a casual liaison), who brings his fiancée, Alex (Kate Beckinsale), home to stay in his mother's house

until the couple can find a place of their own. Jane had been planning to move to her beach house, but at the last minute gave it to a recently dumped boyfriend.

Sam and Alex are both graduates of Harvard Medical School pursuing different areas of medicine. Sam, an aspiring psychiatrist, takes a job in the mental ward of a Los Angeles hospital. Alex is completing a paper on the mating habits of the fruit fly. The same bitter conflicts between hip and square that inflamed the popular culture of the late 60's and early 70's are replayed in "Laurel Canyon," but more gently, and with the roles reversed. As in the British comedy series "Absolutely Fabulous," the square, hard-working younger generation looks askance at its elders' careless self-indulgence.

Mr. Bale's Sam is a tense, soft-spoken young man who keeps a tight lid on his seething rage, but when he blows, he goes ballistic. Deeply embarrassed by his mother as well as resentful of his bohemian childhood, he squirms with discomfort under her roof. Alex, however, finds herself inexorably drawn to the party swirling around her.

Each is led into temptation. Sam is avidly pursued by Sara (Natascha McElhone), a fellow doctor (from Israel), and in their scenes together, the sexual chemistry between them crackles. One evening, Alex, who has taken to reading *Spin* magazine and giving impromptu critiques at recording sessions, is coaxed by Ian and Jane to frisk with them in the swimming pool. Once in the water, she finds herself exchanging kisses with her future mother-in-law.

Having set up its domestic conflicts, the movie doesn't know exactly where to go or how far, but when the inevitable emotional explosions erupt, the mutual recriminations carry a sharp sting.

"Laurel Canyon" is superbly acted, with the exception of Ms. Beckinsale, whose tense, colorless Alex conveys no inner life. The movie is almost stolen by Mr. Nivola, whose Ian is a fascinating contradiction: an articulate, sensitive musician and a charming predator.

As recent films depicting Hollywood music people go, "Laurel Canyon" is several cuts above "The Banger Sisters," with its synthetic groupie nostalgia. It is about equal to Allison Anders's underappreciated "Sugar Town," an acerbic dissection of music-business veterans and climbers that feels more contemporary than "Laurel Canyon," which wears a heavy scent of leftover patchouli oil. But "Laurel Canyon," unlike "Sugar Town," is unabashedly fond of its characters. It doesn't play generational favorites. It gives its earnest young doctors and rock 'n' roll renegades equal sympathy.

## LAUREL CANYON

Written and directed by Lisa Cholodenko; director of photography, Wally Pfister; edited by Amy E. Duddleston; music by Craig Wedren; production designer, Catherine Hardwicke; produced by Susan A. Stover and Jeffrey Levy-Hinte. Running time: 103 minutes. This film is rated R.

WITH: Frances McDormand (Jane), Christian Bale (Sam), Kate Beckinsale (Alex), Natascha McElhone (Sara) and Alessandro Nivola (Ian).

Available in VHS/DVD public performance and 35mm to universities, museums & other non-theatrical customers (all dates subject to theatrical approval)

**CALL NEW YORKER FILMS TOLL FREE: 1-877-247-6200**

85 Fifth Avenue, 11th floor, New York, NY 10003 • Tel: (212) 645-4600 • Fax: (212) 645-3232 • nontheatrical@newyorkerfilms.com