

DVD Select: Truth is scarier than fiction in 'Maxed Out'

by *Robert_J_Hawkins*

So, you like scary movies?

Here's one that will really scare the bejesus out of you: "Maxed Out" (Magnolia, 4 stars), a documentary about credit card debt and how it can tear your life apart.

'MAXED OUT' - 'Maxed Out,' by director James D. Scurlock, is a frightening expose of the credit card industry and the high amount of debt most Americans carry. CNS Photo courtesy of James D. Scurlock. Can? How it IS tearing your life apart. Chances are, you too are wrestling with debt right now.

You know the drill. You start paying on time and then you miss a payment by a few days. You're hit with a late fee and then your interest rate jumps to 21.9 percent. Maybe more. Pretty soon the monthly nut is bigger than you ever imagined and no matter how much you pay off, the pile of debt never seems to go down.

Writer and director James D. Scurlock looked deeply into the dark American debtor soul and has come away with a chilling story that everyone - and I mean everyone - should see.

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin

Know this first and foremost: The modern financial industry is bigger than you, smarter than you and spends 24 hours a day thinking up ways of separating you from your money and your assets.

This documentary has a lesson and that lesson is: the moment you sign up for a credit card, you are screwed.

The average American household at the time this film was made in 2006 was juggling more than \$9,000 in credit card debt and was paying \$1,300 a year in interest. Between 1994 and 2004 more than 10 million Americans declared bankruptcy. As we all know, in 2005, the politicians plugged up that escape hole for the financial industry.

Scurlock went around and talked to good people straddled with bad debt. There are the mothers of college kids who hanged themselves in despair after racking up credit card debt. There is the couple whose mother committed suicide. The military family that had to declare bankruptcy. The poorly educated families who bought slick promises. The families of dead people who still get credit card solicitations.

Then there are the people in the industry who tell about holding back payment checks and even shredding them so that card holders can be assessed late fees.

Scurlock watches debt collectors and debt buyers who gleefully go about the business of embarrassing or terrifying people into paying up. They look and sound like the old energy traders from Enron who jerked around California and shook it down for millions of dollars.

He listens in on the financial advice givers - Dave Ramsey and Suze Orman and even the late Jerry Falwell whose financial advice to in-debt congregants from the pulpit was: give even more to his church and God will pull you out of your woes. He calls it "spiritual mathematics."

Harvard Law School professor and author Elizabeth Warren recounts how the credit card industry pursues those who have gone through bankruptcy, offering them fresh new lines of credit. Why? Because they can't file for bankruptcy again and because they already have "a taste for credit."

Kind of like offering an alcoholic a celebratory drink right after he exits his first AA meeting.

There is little doubt where Scurlock's sentiments align. The consumer lending credit industry is sleazy, predatory, manipulative and extortionist. And the political system under the current administration backs them to the hilt.

Sure, there are people who should never own a credit card. We might see them as financial risks but as Harvard's Warren notes, the credit card firms see them as their biggest profit center - the ones least likely to

meet their debt obligations.

If you're not riding the credit roller coaster already, this documentary will scare you away from it for good. In other words, show it to your teenage kids. Tell them, debt can kill you in many more ways than smoking.

Don't pick up either dirty habit and you'll get through this life OK.

"Maxed Out" extras include such features as an old black and white educational film in which Mr. Money talks with youngsters John and Judy about "The Wise Use of Credit"; "What Is a Credit Report?"; Elizabeth Warren on "Bankruptcy: A Life Changing Experience"; radio host Dave Ramsey on "Personal Responsibility"; and a promo for "Americans for Fairness in Lending."

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Norbit" (DreamWorks/Paramount, 1 star) So Eddie Murphy makes this hopelessly unfunny and embarrassingly bad comedy and then wonders why the Academy didn't give him an Oscar for his good work in "Dreamgirls." Well, duh. Sort of lends irony to the movie's tagline: "Have you ever made a really big mistake?" Yes, Eddie, and its name is "Norbit."

"Fired!" (Shout! Factory, 2 stars) So Woody Allen fired actress Annabelle Gurwitch and that got her to thinking ... pretty soon there was a book, a play, a documentary and now the DVD - all about people who have been fired at one time or another. Gurwitch talks to well-known actors, comics and economists (entertainers all) but she also talks with the auto plant assembly line workers who get laid off and others. There's humorous material in downsizing but there is also valid social concern and Gurwitch seems to get at both.

"The Derby Stallion" (Echo Bridge, 2 stars) An easy family flick about a troubled kid and a horse and the race they train for. Mainly for the tweener fans of "High School Musical" star Zac Efron, who stars here.

More this week: Supernatural thriller "The Messenger"; another troubled teen grows up in the presence of animals in "The Eye of the Dolphin"; controversial documentary about terrorists "Suicide Killers"; Susan Sarandon narrates "Secrets of the Code"; disturbing documentary about one Abu Ghraib Prison survivor "The Prisoner Or: How I Planned to Kill Tony Blair" and a heartbreaking documentary on a national failure, "Big Easy to Big Empty: The Untold Story of the Drowning of New Orleans."

IT CAME FROM TV

Robin Hood: Season One; CHiPs: The Complete First Season; The Cosby Show: Season Three and Four; The Henry Rollins Show: Season 1 (2006); Hogan's Heroes: The Complete Sixth Season (1970-71); Rescue Me: The Complete Third Season; Seinfeld: Season Eight (1996-97); Hex: The Complete First Season; and The Fall Guy.

FROM THE VAULTS

The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert Extra Frills Edition (1994); Coming to America Special Collector's Edition (1988); Fantastic 4 Extended Edition (2005); Fantastic Voyage Special Edition (1966); Meatballs: Special Edition (1979) and The Sand Pebbles Special Edition (1966).

Italian director Sergio Leone changed forever the look and feel of cowboy Westerns with his movies, fondly called "spaghetti Westerns," many starring Clint Eastwood. The "Sergio Leone Anthology" is a two-disc box that holds "A Fistful of Dollars," "For a Few Dollars More," "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," and "Duck, You Sucker."

"Dean Martin & Jerry Lewis Collection" (Paramount) Five films from this now dated 50s comedy duo. Titles are: "You're Never Too Young" (1955); "Living It Up" (1954); "Artists and Models" (1955); "Partners" (1956); and "Hollywood or Bust" (1956).

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