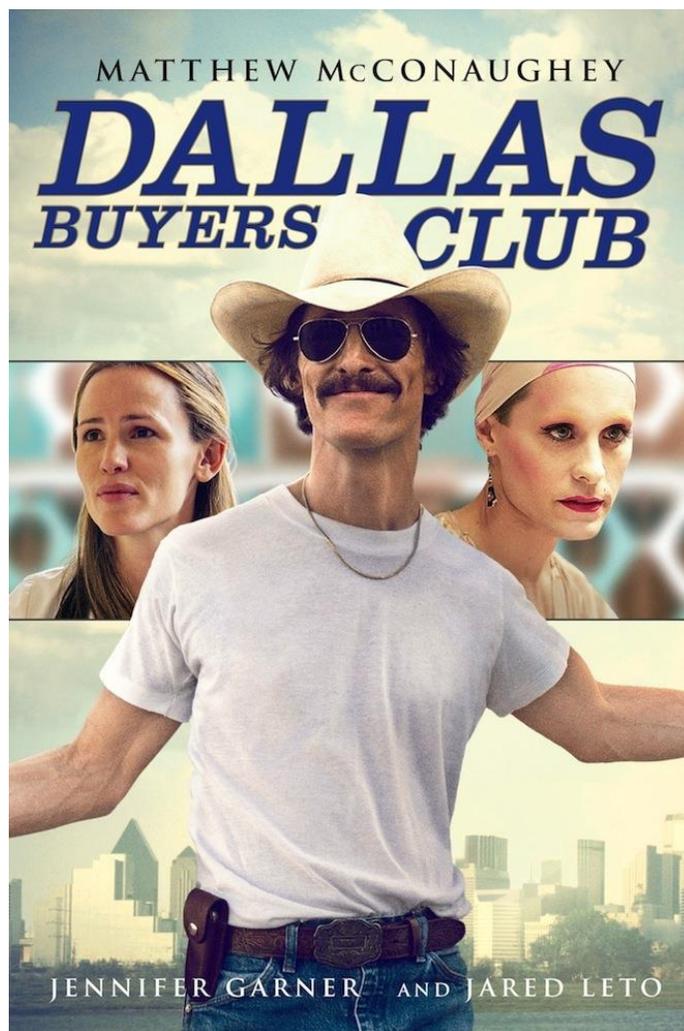


## Dallas Buyers Club



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Produced by Robbie Brenner & Rachel Winter. Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée. Screenplay by Graig Borten & Melisa Wallack. Based on Borten's interviews with Ron Woodroof and Woodroof's journals. Production Design by John Paino. Cinematography by Yves Bélanger. Music: assorted previously released songs. Edited by John Mac McMurphy & Martin Pensia.

Cinematic length: 116 minutes. Distributed by Focus Features. Production Companies: Voltage Pictures/Truth Entertainment. Cinematic release September 2013: DVD/Blur Ray release February 2014. Check for ratings. Rating 90%.

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## Cast

Ron Woodroof: Mathew McConaughey

Doctor Eve Saks: Jennifer Garner

Rayon: Jared Leto

Doctor Sevard: Denis O'Hare

Richard Barkley: Michael O'Neill

Doctor Vass: Griffin Dunne

David Wayne: Dallas Roberts

Nurse Frazin: Donna Duplantier

Hispanic Nurse: Ian Casselberry

T.J.: Kevin Rankin

Tucker: Steve Zahn

Mr Yamata: Scott Takeda

Sunflower: Bradford Cox

Kelly: Noelle Wilcox

Francine: Jane McNeill

Denise: Deneen Tyler

Border Agent: Sean Boyd

Rayon's Father: James Dumont

## Review

*Dallas Buyers Club* was made for five million dollars, which can only be a shoestring budget for a major release in America. Filming took only 25 days, usually such a time span for a full length film signifies rushed junk. The topic matter, the losing battle of a man to survive AIDS, sounded like box office poison. There were no explosions, high speed car chases or heterosexual sex scenes in the script: more box office poison. Disparagers could fix on the way that *Dallas Buyers Club* was not even filmed in Dallas. New Orleans and other locations in Louisiana filled in. The soundtrack did not contain one well known original song. From the start of screenplay writing to release took eleven years. In that time several famous directors, screenplay writers and actors were considered but opted out. No great publicity push was made for *Dallas Buyers Club*. The world premier was at a foreign film festival. Only two of the cast and crew are well known. Put all this together and you have almost every essential ingredient required for a disaster. Instead the film made over \$55 million and gained justified widespread critical and public acclaim.

Some of that success comes from the cast's efforts. Lead Mathew McConaughey originally came from the Dallas area and he clearly knows that world and its people. His acting is so good that he does not seem to be acting: it is more like living on screen. This also applies to Jared Leto. The stagey, centre stage, somewhat manufactured performances that usually get Academy Award nominations are not evident in these performances or anywhere else in the film. Both men deservedly won academy awards, McConaughey for Best Actor, Leto for Best Supporting Actor. The film gained four other nominations, including Best Film and Best Original Screenplay and did well at film festivals, the Golden Globe Awards and The Screen Actors Guild Awards.

Great acting can only be only one part of the story behind its success. An unpretentious directing style, an avoidance of stereotypes and formulaic plot devices as well as an original story about an important issue were all contributing factors.

Events late in the life of Ron Woodroof form this film's narrative base. How accurate the depictions of his personality and sexuality are remains controversial. In the shaping of his story for cinematic purposes some characters are composites, while others, such as his daughter and sister, are not depicted. Keeping the cinematic reshaping process in mind or even treating the film as a fictional

treatment emerging from facts makes the best starting point. *Dallas Buyers Club* deals with a bigger truth than some details in the life of an individual and it does this honestly. Credit goes to all those who worked on the film. This credit goes for dealing with important issues that should have been dealt with thirty years before its release as well as for cinematic qualities. In 1992 co-screenwriter Robert Borden read of Woodroof's life in Dallas papers, and realising there was a film in the dying man's life, began extensive interviews with him. Unfortunately he could not find funding for his script for many years.

Woodroof's story starts in late 1985, just as the news of Rock Hudson's death from AIDS appears in newspaper's front pages at his cafeteria table. Ron Woodroof (Mathew McConaughey) a Dallas electrician heading for middle age, seems remote from such events. He lives in a trailer, existing in a world of delayed adolescent pleasures. Cocaine, alcohol, bull riding, shooting pool, casual heterosexual sex and hanging out with his peer group (which denigrates everyone outside the group) make the pattern of his life. This changes when after an electrical accident he finds himself hospitalised.

*Body language, placing, costumes and the direction of gazes all reveal the different ways and attitudes of the two in an alliance of convenience. They come to like each other.*



When Doctors Sevad (Denis O'Hare) and Saks (Jennifer Garner) inform him that double checked blood tests reveal that he has AIDS and that will die in thirty days he goes into more than adamant disbelief. His tantrum does not quite reach going berserk but his repeated battle cry has to be that he cannot have any "faggot disease" comes close. Like many in 1985 he ignored the fact that only 70% of AIDS cases were homosexual men. After calming into mere vexation and then accepting his condition he determines to fight it.

For him his old way of life must indeed be consigned to the dead pool. His peer group ostracize him as a revealed closet homosexual. He finds his trailer trashed, apparently by fearful residents who want him out. He forms a friendship with Doctor Saks, who in her cultural tastes, manners and background lives in a very different world. Much of his life now revolves around hospital treatment. He shares a room with Rayon, (Jared Leto) an easy-going, witty and shrewd transvestite who could do very well in a 1970s Farrah Fawcett-Majors lookalike contest. Woodroof survives longer than Sevard's decreed thirty days by using discarded anti-aids drugs supplied by a nurse. When they run out the nurse advises him to go to a Mexican clinic run by Doctor Vass (Griffin Dunne). Once there he finds that Vass can supply cheaper, more effective and more abundant drugs than the U.S.A. allows. He now holds the virus at bay and he has an idea about how with Rayon's help he can make money.

The second half of the film deals with Woodroof's battles to set up an anti-AIDS drug dealing business. His heterosexual ways and wary attitude make selling to AIDS victims difficult so using Rayon to cruise bars he makes sales, but becomes a victim of his own success. Smuggling ever larger amounts of drugs across the border means that becomes more difficult. Doctor Sevard is on to him and he backs the legally allowed drugs, as does America's bureaucracy, the AFDA. Woodroof tries to evade their blocking attempts by setting up The Dallas Buyers Club, supposedly to play pool, drink and watch tv costs \$400 a month for membership. In return for the fee anti-AIDS drugs are supplied. Initially Woodroof is not a caped crusader for social justice: those without the money do not get the drugs from him. When he battles legally for his right to distribute the best possible drug for treatment he unintentionally opens up a battle for AIDS/HIV victims and he becomes a hero.

*Dallas Buyers Club* shows the battle between the assorted government forces who try to uphold the approved AIDS fighting drugs while suppressing other choices and

those who want to spread the use of more effective drugs. What the film does not explicitly do is show why the government will not adapt the newer drugs. When Doctor Saks becomes convinced that Woodroof's views are correct and she campaigns for his drugs to be used, she gets a sacking. The people who do this to her and who try to close the Dallas Buyers Club down are not zealots who believe that their treatments are the best available, they are apparently just functionaries doing their job.

The film raises the question of why it took so long to allow the new drugs, but does not answer it. Perhaps considering the possibilities for litigation inherent in that question they were wise to let it alone.

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