eddie murphy has had his share of ups and downs during his career . known for his notorious late 80's slump , murphy has still managed to bounce back with a handful of hits in the past few years . with the exception of the dreadful holy man , he appears to be on pace for a full-fledged comeback . life was a great move on the part of murphy and co-star martin lawrence , because it's a great showcase for both actors that never resorts to slap-sticky drivel .

director ted demme is smart enough to realize that the two comedians can generate enough genuine laughs on their own, and doesn't

insert a distracting plot to back them up. life is , in a sense , one great balancing act with murphy on one end and lawrence on the other . amazingly , the scale never tips in either's favor due to the marvelous chemistry and wonderful contrast that each actor allows the other . as the movie opens , we're introduced to ray gibson (eddie murphy) , a two-timing pickpocket who schmoozes his way into a club . there he meets a successful businessman named claude banks (martin lawrence) . somehow , after multiple contrivances , the mismatched pair find themselves on their way to mississippi on a moonshine run . when all is said and done , ray and claude have been framed for a murder that was actually committed by the town sheriff . hence the setting of life : mississippi state prison , where the main characters come to realize their unlikely friendship is important , and become set on finding an fool-proof escape plan . the film takes us from the 30's all the way to the 90's , presenting a difficult task in showing how the aging process affects ray and claude . luckily , rick baker handles the makeup effects of the two actors in a fantastic , academy award caliber manner . not only do we believe the characters look as if they're 90 years old , but they sound like it , too .

murphy and lawrence are completely convincing in the lead roles, even as crotchety old cons bickering over a game of cards. this is just one of the pleasant surprises that the film has tucked up it's sleeve. while the ads are marketing life as a straight arrow comedy, there is a hefty amount of dramatic material hidden at it's core. but the comedic aspects work wonderfully, wisely drawing strength from the talents of the two stars. the movie is more of a comedy than it is a drama, but in both senses, it's an overwhelming delight.

i could say a few bad things about the movie, but i don't want to . it's such a nice surprise, such a great vehicle for eddie murphy and martin lawrence, that it warrants a huge smile as the credits begin to roll.