An early Woody Allen comedy, *Take the Money and Run* is anarchic, awash with one-liners and perhaps not quite as good as people would wish it be. Put together in the documentary style, the film opens with Virgil Starkwell (Woody Allen) being born into the world. A nerd from almost his first breath, Virgil constantly tries to fit in with his peers, with scant success. Even when they do give Virgil a break, their impulse is more often than not to set him up and smash his glasses. An average student, a bright new world dawns for Virgil when he's given a cello. Determined to succeed, he practices day and night. Unfortunately for his parents (Ethel Sokolow and Henry Leff), Virgil fails to improve. So cacophonous are his attempts that the cello is soon consigned to history.

Bereft of an emotional outlet (being beaten into believing in God doesn't count) Virgil instead turns his attention to petty crime. Finding a more-or-less equal place in a local gang, Virgil manages to gain both a measure of fulfillment and fund illicit cello lessons. The problem is that he's hopelessly inept at both planning and executing robberies. On his first attempt to hit the big time, Virgil winds up stealing a money bag with an inoperable stolen gun. Prison, and real villainy, beckons. Jumping forward a few years, Virgil remains as naive and optimistic as ever. Given the chance for parole, via an experimental vaccine, he re-enters a much altered society. Unable to get a job, purse snatching leads Virgil to Louise (Janet Margolin), the soon to be love of his life. How ironic it is that she should propel him back to robbing banks.

Spiced up with a little of everything, it's clear that Allen intended *Take the Money and Run* as a showcase for his comical talents. Throughout he engulfs the camera in a torrent of passing jokes, good only for a laugh then disposed of without regret. These tend to stick to the traditional physical and visual lines established in other films of the genre, while Allen still places his personal spin on the proceedings. The contrast with his later, more cerebral, work is stark, though even here some of Allen's neuroses can be glimpsed in nascent form. The drawback to this all-out approach is that the film follows a rather erratic course, with whole battalions of gags being sacrificed for little effect (when a slightly more measured attack could have provided a higher hit-rate). If you have the appropriate inside knowledge however, particularly of classic prison movies, then you could be in for a treat.

As you might expect, the plot is extremely loose, almost to the point of non-existence. The crucial binding force comes from the narration of Jackson Beck, dryly charting Virgil's life, influences and notoriety. Together with a number of interviews, with people such as his parents and prison psychiatrist (Don Frazier), his days of crime are dissected for consumption. While convincing performances play a minor part in all of this, the cock-eyed romance of Louise and Virgil adds a certain winsome quality. Equally innocent, though in different ways, their love has a curiously untarnished air to it, even if the realities of the day-to-day are wholly depressing.

Ultimately, *Take the Money and Run* is unsatisfying to audiences brought up on Allen's later works. It's full of good ideas but without the insight that has come with greater maturity, the movie's an empty ride. The chaos, satire and slapstick help of course, so overall perhaps *Take the Money and Run* is worth catching as a rare curiosity of Allen's formative years.