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# The popular musical biopic in the post-studio era: four approaches to an overlooked film genre

Jesse Keith Schlotterbeck  
*University of Iowa*

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THE POPULAR MUSICAL BIOPIC IN THE POST-STUDIO ERA:  
FOUR APPROACHES TO AN OVERLOOKED FILM GENRE

by

Jesse Keith Schlotterbeck

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Doctor of  
Philosophy degree in Film Studies  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

December 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Corey Creekmur

## ABSTRACT

The mid-2000s saw a surge in the popularity of musical biopics: films such as *Ray* (2004) which tell the story of a star musician. While academic studies have addressed biopics treating classical and jazz composers, the popular musical biopic (encompassing blues, folk, pop, country, rap, and rock) is not only the least studied subtype of the musical biopic, but the most profitable and frequently made. Film studies has neglected the popular musical biopic for so long due to the genre's uniquely visible connections to other media: musical biopics are deeply invested in popular music and have often appeared as made-for-TV movies. Additionally, every biopic is, by definition, secondary to extant print or audio-visual materials on its subject. While most film studies scholarship makes a case for the originality and importance of filmmaking in the hierarchy of media studies, musical biopics position film as inextricably tied to other cultural forms.

I analyze four different aspects of the musical biopic that illustrate its significance: Chapter One addresses the musical biopic in the context of the post-studio era entertainment industry. I study *A Hard Day's Night* as a film which reconciles artistry with the commercial imperative of cross-promotion. Chapter Two surveys the increased presence of minority entertainers in post-studio era musical biopics, covering films featuring African American musicians, as well as films which pair a black mentor with a white musician or producer. Chapter Three examines the relationship between storytelling, particularly the portrayal of love relationships, and song performances. I find in that the post-studio era musical biopic often reconciles narrative structures inherited from the

classical Hollywood musical with post-classical film styles. Chapter Four, a psychoanalytic study of the contemporary musical biopic, theorizes the genre's turn to the representation of flawed and scandalous subjects.

Each chapter addresses a different tendency of the contemporary musical biopic through the close analysis of a selection of films. However, in all cases I propose a mode of analysis that is broadly applicable and a topical focus that is widely characteristic of the musical biopic, a popular but little understood staple of Hollywood filmmaking in the post-studio era

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Date

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the thesis of

Jesse Keith Schlotterbeck

has been approved by the Examination Committee for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Film Studies at the December 2010 graduation.

Thesis Committee: \_\_\_\_\_  
Corey Creekmur, Thesis Supervisor

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Rick Altman

\_\_\_\_\_  
Loren Glass

\_\_\_\_\_  
Cheryl Herr

\_\_\_\_\_  
Kembrew McLeod

For my parents



I thought I was supposed to be getting a change of scenery,  
and so far, I've been in a train and a room and a car and  
a room and a room and a room.

-- "Paul's Grandfather," *A Hard Day's Night*

There's something happening here,  
but you don't know what it is,  
do you, Mr. Jones?

-- Bob Dylan, "Ballad of a Thin Man"

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, musical biopics—films which tell the stories of star musicians—have been an increasingly prominent genre films. The post-studio era musical biopic has spanned numerous musical styles—such as pop, country, rock, and blues—culminating, most recently, in the mid-2000s when *Ray* (2004) and *Walk the Line* (2005) became the most profitable films in the genre's history. Yet, extant scholarship on the genre covers less prominent iterations of the musical biopic. The few previous studies on the subject focus on the studio era (films of the 1940s and 50s) and musical styles (jazz, classical, Tin Pan Alley, and Broadway musicals) of diminishing popularity. In contrast to previous studies of the musical biopic by authors such as Krin Gabbard and John C. Tibbetts, I focus on an era, 1960 to now, and musical styles that have received less attention.

The post-studio era also coincides with other cultural and technological developments that will figure as important contexts for my study: the emergence of television and the invention of the 45 and then the LP record, both of which aided in the ascendance of rock as the dominant popular music. Television and recorded music figure as ideal cross-promotional outlets for feature films following the anti-monopoly legislation of the Paramount Decree. While there is a long history of the composer biopic—which encompasses not only classical, but Broadway and Tin Pan Alley composers—the genre's more recent embrace of rock and pop genres is a variation more attuned to the contemporary entertainment industry. Rock and pop biopics are often relatively inexpensive films (without A-list stars and with few special effects) which, instead, capitalize



on the fame of musical figures and present a greater opportunity for synergetic investments that are not limited to the film-medium. Jeff Smith identifies *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), the focus of my first chapter, as the principal film which encouraged Hollywood to both use rock music extensively in films and to cross-promote films with rock soundtracks on record.<sup>1</sup>

The genre's turn toward these popular musical genres has also, unexpectedly, reconnected the musical biopic with the classical musical, since rock and pop stars are almost always singers and performers. This shift in the genre varies from earlier examples in two key ways. Pre-60s musical biopics usually featured either composers—such as the Broadway lyricist/composer duos portrayed in *Words and Music* (1948) and *Three Little Words* (1950)—who wrote tunes for others to sing, or classical or jazz composers whose music functioned fluidly as diegetic and non-diegetic music. Music is foregrounded as performance with much greater consistency in films about popular stars Ray Charles (*Ray*) or Johnny Cash (*Walk the Line*) who perform songs with lyrics that can be connected to the narrative of the film. Given my focus on the *popular* musical biopic, the prominence of performance and lyric-based musical numbers in these films links them to the classical Hollywood musical.

The musical biopic is, largely, where the musical now exists in contemporary cinema. Yet, some critics do not fully see how much this subgenre is indebted to the classical musical. Marc Miller, for instance, claims that the musical “entered the ‘90s as a relic of an America that looked hopelessly naïve and deluded to baby boomers, ‘Gen Xers,’ and the MTV crowd,” and that Disney cartoon features, nearly singlehandedly, kept the genre afloat.<sup>2</sup> By locating the musical biopic (since the 1970s) as central to the musical, I present a significantly

different account of the musical as a genre that remained vital genre through the post-studio era. In the selection of the films for analysis, I cover the most popular films of this genre. A chart (Appendix C) of the highest grossing musical biopics from 1978 to the present confirms that this genre has shifted away from jazz and classical to popular music. Eight of the ten highest earners are in popular musical genres. Bracketing out *Amadeus* (1984) and *Shine* (1996), the eight highest earning films: *Walk the Line* (2005), *Ray* (2004), *Coal Miner's Daughter*, (1980), *La Bamba* (1987), *The Doors* (1991), *What's Love Got to Do With It* (1993), *Notorious* (2009), and *Selena* (1997) are all discussed in this dissertation.

Each of my four chapters covers a distinct approach to the post-studio era musical biopic. In every case, I select an angle of focus that is generally characteristic of the genre, lending itself to an analysis of not only the films that I cover in each chapter but many other titles. Chapter One addresses the post-studio era entertainment industry: the context of all the films I analyze. I highlight *A Hard Day's Night* as a film that was able to negotiate this context with great inventiveness, but also as a mode of the musical biopic (in which stars play themselves) that was rarely imitated. Chapter Two surveys the increased presence of minority entertainers in post-studio era musical biopics and Chapter Three covers the synthesis of structures inherited from the classical era with post-classical era film style. Chapter Four, a psychoanalytic study of the contemporary biopic, is the most speculative but also proposes the most broadly applicable account the genre, addressing, in particular, its increasingly negative appeal.

My dissertation follows a loosely chronological progression: Chapter One focuses on *A Hard Day's Night*, from the mid-1960s; Chapter Two covers films

from the mid 60s and 70s in comparison to more recent films from the 90s and 2000s; Chapter Three compares films from the late 70s and 80s to films of the mid 2000s; Chapter Four focuses only on films from the mid-2000s. My conclusion includes a short analysis of *Notorious* (2009), the most recent film covered in this project. Thus, this dissertation can be read, in order, as a chronological survey of the genre's significant tendencies from the mid-60s to present. My primary focus, however, was not to produce a historical survey of the genre, but to present in detail the contemporary musical biopic's most salient qualities.

These characteristics are cumulatively analyzed, as each chapter's analysis overlaps with the focus of the following chapter. For instance, Chapter One covers on the genre's tendency towards reflexive representation. Chapter Two, on the representation of African American entertainers, builds on this focus, presenting a specific iteration of the genre's reflexive tendencies. Contemporary films such as *Cadillac Records* reflect back on the historical racism of the entertainment industry. The portrayal of racism in *Cadillac Records* alongside entertaining musical performances anticipates the focus of Chapter Three. Here, I continue to attend to the representation of 'great' individuals in limiting contexts. The circumstance emphasized in Chapter Three shifts from historical racism to the work inherent to the production of mass entertainment. Film such as *The Buddy Holly Story* and *Coal Miner's Daughter* focus on the representation of the star's labor as both work and artistry. I analyze this dual focus by attending to the musical biopic's alternation between song numbers and narrative. Chapter Two and Chapter Three, thus, both point to the balanced presentation of 'upbeat' and 'downbeat' aspects of the entertainer's life. In both cases, the negative aspects of the star's story are located in their historical and cultural

context, in the insufficiencies of society or the entertainment industry. Chapter Four continues this focus on the balanced presentation of individual accomplishment and insufficiency. In this case, I analyze the genre's increasing tendency to locate insufficiency in the personality of the lead subjects themselves rather than a surrounding context. Thus, this dissertation traces the evolution of the musical biopic's portrayal of the star subject. I emphasize, in order, the genre's emphasis on reflexivity, the context of historical racism, the context of the mass entertainment industry, and, finally, the flaws of the famous.

I do not study the same films in multiple chapters. My serial coverage ensured that I considered a suitably large sample of texts for a genre studies project. In my filmography, I note 34 titles analyzed in detail. This organizational choice is not intended to suggest that each chapter's mode of analysis is relevant only to the films included in that chapter; rather, each chapter highlights a tendency of the genre that is broadly typical of the genre. I underscore this point in my Conclusion, where I discuss how *Notorious* can be analyzed in terms of any of the four characteristics presented in my study.

### **The Biopic**

The lowly biopic! – Though the 'true' life story has long been a staple film genre, ranging from the silent era to the present day, such pictures get little critical respect or academic attention. Why is this? Chief among complaints of the biopic's mediocrity is that it is not a 'uniquely cinematic' genre: where most other genres allow a cleaner artistic slate, the life-story of its source precedes every biopic. This secondary quality is what has led many to dismiss the biopic as a 'bad object.'<sup>3</sup>

As Rick Altman points out, the identification and classification of film genres functions to highlight the best and the worst that cinema has to offer: “It would appear that genre’s capacity for positive identification is matched by a tendency to view certain genres, and thus genre production in general as bad objects.”<sup>4</sup> Some genres (e.g. film noir, which Tom Gunning has suggested “may be the greatest achievement of film studies”) are positively valued.<sup>5</sup> The biopic, by contrast, rarely receives such praise. My aim, here, is not to praise the biopic, *per se*, but to understand it better. As George Custen, the foremost biopic scholar, has pointed out, “Poking fun at the biopic’s aesthetic pretensions and scholarly shortcomings, or expressing contempt or disbelief at the relentless teleology that drove this genre, missed the important work the films actually did.”<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this study, I accept Custen’s definition of the biopic as a film which “is minimally composed of the life, or the portion of a life, of a real person whose real name is used,” studying musical biographies whose connection to “the life of a historical person, past or present” is firmly established via the clear identification of its star-subject.<sup>7</sup> Following this definition usefully restricts my range of focus. Future studies of musical biopics ought to address the broader network of films connected to this genre, including texts such as *Purple Rain* and *Dreamgirls*, but, for the sake of clarity and focus, this is not such a broad-ranging project.<sup>8</sup>

Attention to genres such as the biopic redresses a tendency of film studies to consistently study masterworks at a much greater rate than popular cinema. John C. Tibbetts, author of one of the most extensive studies of the classical musical biopic, tellingly comments that the “true ‘author’ of these films, [is] not the screenwriters, [or] directors, but the [producers].”<sup>9</sup> Given the romantic

associations with the heroic director who struggles within the studio system, Tibbetts's discussion of the musical biopic as a genre clearly invested in the appeals of Hollywood filmmaking (which attracted directors like Michael Curtiz, who openly accommodated themselves to the studio system) highlights this critical difference from much of what has been studied in American cinema. Mike Chopra-Gant works against the tendency of film studies to emphasize exceptional (and often unpopular) works. In *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America*, box-office charts are his guide to the selection of films for study. He finds that film studies frequently covers relatively unpopular genres (such as film noir) while neglecting those that audiences consumed in the greatest numbers (such as the musical biopic).<sup>10</sup>

In the case of the biopic (and musical biopic), what is sacrificed in terms of originality is gained in typicality. Extant studies of the biopic have defined the primary object of study differently than me. While I am interested in the musical biopic's broader relationship to the entertainment industry and the enduring appeal of Hollywood cinema, Custen emphasizes the instructional function of biopics as "agents of socialization . . . [that] were assumed to be capable of actually teaching something."<sup>11</sup> Instead of focusing on the social and political aspects of this genre, my study accounts for the genre's location amongst a broader network of media and popular culture.

Additionally, while Custen studies the biographical genre as a whole, I focus on the musical biopic. Because this is a narrower genre study, popular music stands out particularly as the sphere of art/culture/industry that is put in play here. A study of the musical biopic, by definition, relies greatly on the genres that constitute this hybrid, the musical and the biopic. While its reception

has been more uneven, the musical has also been subject to much of the same derision and dismissal as the biopic, which brings me to the next segment, on the genre's musical dimensions.

### **The Musical**

The lowly musical! – While the musical genre was greatly popular during the studio era, since the 1960s, the audience's growing discomfort with the musical has been widely noted. The most recognizable convention of this genre, that characters regularly perform songs, is now distracting and awkward to the contemporary viewer. In his book-length survey of the musical, Michael Dunne confirms the contemporary audience's "widespread rejection of musical numbers, based on a literalist resistance to the 'world is a stage' premise of many traditional musicals."<sup>12</sup> New musicals must take such resistance into account and conceive of "a way to free potential viewers temporarily from their suspicion of the genre itself."<sup>13</sup>

In addition to popular discomfort with a dominant stylistic device of the genre—transitions from narrative to song—the tone of the musical is at odds with a tendency of critical film spectatorship to elevate the serious and the austere above the apparently trivial, upbeat, and attractive. In her study of the historical bias against "the pretty" in film studies, Rosalind Galt cites *Moulin Rouge* as the kind of popular film "criticized as too pretty and insufficiently authentic."<sup>14</sup> This is a telling choice in terms of genre as well; we can extend this dismissal to the musical more generally, as the genre which (according to the dominant standards of the film critic) is most invested in artifice, excess, and anti-realism. The musical, far more than any other genre, consistently evinces

the ‘distasteful’ characteristics that Galt wishes to redress: “film criticism has over and over again dismissed what it sees as too pretty— empty spectacle, surface without depth, the mass ornament.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, in large part because of this tendency to be more excessive than other feature films, the musical has attracted many devoted fans (some in academia) who have made a convincing case for its complexity.

Rick Altman introduces *The American Film Musical* by making a claim for the musical as *gesamtkunstwerk*. He describes the musical, which incorporates “painting, theater, opera, ballet, operetta, the music-hall, Tin Pan Alley, vaudeville, [and] television” as “the most complex art form ever devised.”<sup>16</sup>

James M. Collins accounts for the musical’s complexity in the way it balances stylistic richness and an enduring investment in genre history with mainstream entertainment values:

The musical is simultaneously the most accessible and complex film genre— accessible because the plots are transparent, the numbers are based on familiar popular music of the day, and the visual style is seldom if ever confusing or elliptical . . . At the same time that these films devoted shamelessly to pure entertainment are based on a complicated visual-narrative style that integrates the use of space and of spectator in unparalleled fashion, as well as integrating an acute awareness of the contemporary culture surrounding them and the historical traditions preceding them.<sup>17</sup>

Collins aptly acknowledges the ways that the musical is, indeed, complicated— but also grants the numerous qualities that (for many viewers) belie this premise: the lightness of its tone and its eagerness to entertain.



## The Musical Biopic

The lowly musical biopic! — As a subset to the musical and the biopic, it should not be surprising that the musical biopic, too, has long been neglected by academic criticism and is also frequently panned by popular critics. One of the more surprising detractors of the musical biopic genre is also one of the classical musical's strongest advocates. Rick Altman separates the musical biopic from the history of the musical, perhaps in an effort to distance himself from some of the scorn directed at the genre that is his object of focus, the classical musical. He uses a disease metaphor to describe how “the craze for the musical biography (or biopic) grew to epidemic proportions” during the 1940s. What so frustrates Altman about the musical biography is that this subgenre, which could differentiate itself from the musical genre, works largely within the confines of the broader genre of the classical musical:

Now, of all the non-backstage types of show musicals, the one least likely to approximate the syntax of the backstage musical, it would seem, is the biopic. A man writes music, A man gets his music played and published, A man's music makes him famous, Hollywood films his biography: what could be more distant from the love = art syntax of Warner's backstage musicals? Such logic seems flawless, but what use is logic in the case of a form which against all odds for twenty years survived the abuse of critics, a form which never produced anything approaching a masterpiece . . . ?<sup>18</sup>

Altman's short-order dismissal of this subgenre implies two possibilities of genre development for the musical biopic— that this genre emerges as something distinct from the musical, or that the musical biopic continues to depend greatly on the structure of the classical musical.

I agree with Altman that the musical biopic continues to work with characteristics inherited from the classical musical. I disagree that this observation should entail dismissing the subgenre to move on to more worthy films. The continued pairing of the musical and the biopic is worth exploring at length. Restricting our attention to the musical, the legacy of this genre depends largely on the development of the musical biopic. In the post-studio era, this subgenre has largely displaced the classical-style musical.

### **Film Studies**

To an extent, every dissertation is both a study within and on an academic field. Every scholar who studies the biographical film—even more than the musical—must consider the reasons behind the contradictory fact that the biographical film stands as one of the most popular but least analyzed Hollywood genres. While popular audiences are well-aware of this long-standing genre (judging by the ease with which popular critics refer to it in reviews), the biopic has not received its due attention in film studies. Custen dates the film-biography to the late 1890s, noting, with films such as *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* (1895), that the biopic “was a known commodity almost from film’s beginning.”<sup>19</sup> Custen defines the genre, in the broadest terms, as a film which portrays the life of an actual person who is identified by their name.<sup>20</sup> Custen makes clear that the broadness of his definition is a product of the wide variation that the history of this genre has accommodated. He continues “Other than this trait [of treating a true life story] the definition of what constitutes a biopic— and with it, what counts as fame— shifts anew with each generation.”<sup>21</sup> Custen notes the wide variation of biographical subjects and

the tenor of their treatment, from the biopic as “hagiography,” to “headliners (good or bad),” to the increased treatment of “entertainers themselves.”<sup>22</sup>

Underlying these changes in the evolution of the genre, the biopic figures as a central pop cultural site from which the public gleans a great deal of what they know of history: “While most biopics do not claim to be the definitive history of an individual or era, they are often the only source of information many people with ever have on a given historical subject.”<sup>23</sup> Custen makes two important distinctions here which redress the critical neglect of the genre: that few biopics claim definitiveness (as opposed to their supposed self-importance) and that their investment in the real and the historical (a claim few feature films stake) ought to be a reason *to* study the genre, rather than neglect it. Critical avoidance of a film genre (under that rationale that it is simply too popular to be significant) is a rarity in film studies— a relatively populist discipline, which commonly includes study of Hollywood film genres. Custen discusses the reasons that are usually given for critically neglecting the genre— historical inaccuracy, self-important style, and an aggrandized portrayal of the individual.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the biopic’s most prominent scholar misses what I believe to be the most important reason for lack of work on the biopic: the fact that this is the genre which most clearly points to film’s existence as a part of mass culture, connectable (and not necessarily more significant than) numerous other popular forms.

It is something of a tacit agreement in film studies that the majority of work in this field must in some way prop up the form that constitutes the discipline. As film scholars, there is an unspoken imperative that we ought to attend to and make a case for the texts that prove film’s worthiness as an object

of study. An expected way that this imperative can be satisfied is through the study of great achievements in film (auteur based criticism and the volumes produced on *Citizen Kane* both exemplify this approach). Ideological criticism also makes a case for the centrality of film by situating this medium as a privileged cultural sphere which enforces dominant social values.

My study of the musical biopic represents a very different sort of film studies project: one that does not rely as heavily on assumptions of cinema's primacy as a popular medium. The musical biopic, oppositely, positions film as doubly secondary. Every biopic is, by definition, secondary to its original source and other extant materials (e.g. print biographies or articles in the popular press) on that life story. Consider Carolyn Anderson and George Custen's definitions of the biographical film, and its uniquely secondary quality. Custen writes that, "Unlike the fictive discourse out of which the rest of Hollywood's canon is acknowledged to be fabricated, biopics' putative connection to accuracy and truth makes them unique."<sup>25</sup> Note, here, how the biopic's greater truth claim comes at the expense of the broad canvas that an 'acknowledged fabrication' allows. Anderson discusses how the biographical film always follows extant cultural material:

Since the primary material of biography, the actual lives of people, exists prior to its use in stories of those lives, the biographical construction process follows norms of history and journalism as well as fiction. Certainly great differences exist among biographers in their access to public figures, living or dead, but at one level the material resides in the public domain: the life stories are there for the telling.<sup>26</sup>

Screenplays and character design, under the auspices of the biopic, are apparently less original. On top of that, musical biopics trade on the

representation of a form which (in an exclusive mindset) potentially competes with cinema for status as the most popular art. Nearly all the music stars depicted in musical biopics qualify as masters of their form while musical biopics *do not* typically qualify as great filmmaking. This poses the question: why make, or study films which seem to be more devoted to the representation of other popular media? The genre's evident redundancy represents a kind of threat to scholars more invested in the specificity of cinema.

In a telling reaction to my choice of this dissertation topic, a colleague, surprised at my choice of subject, pointed out that biopics are films that "*do not have to exist.*" I agree that the biopic is rarely a form which registers as wholly original and essential. Instead, the biopic (and the musical biopic to an even greater extent) points toward a reading of cinema as a mass medium, frequently connected to other forms of popular entertainment.

Though this genre is both historically and currently popular, it has not attracted a proportionate degree of interest or respect from academic or popular critics. Consider *New York Times* critic A.O. Scott's comments on the Edith Piaf biopic, *La Vie en Rose* (2007):

It turns out that we Americans don't have a monopoly on singers and composers who emerge from traumatic childhoods, battle drug addiction, pursue difficult love affairs and win the hearts of millions. It also turns out that, while musical idioms sometimes have a hard time crossing the barriers of language and culture, certain narrative clichés are universal . . . In the end, as often happens in movies of this kind, *La Vie en Rose* is saved by Piaf herself. Most of the songs in the film are accompanied by subtitles. (An exception is "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien," the signature of her last years.) They are hardly necessary, given the undiminished power of that voice. Unfortunately the movie isn't either.<sup>27</sup>

The qualities that Scott identifies as redundancy could also be characterized as typicality. Scott objects, in the first instance, to the film's adherence to generic formulas. Later, he dismisses the film by privileging the value of Piaf's original performances over this biopic. For Scott, the power of the original songs makes the comparatively less accomplished film derivative and inessential.

What Scott misses by falsely pitting musical biopics against the original recordings of musicians is the centrality of cross-promotion and multi-media productions in the contemporary marketplace. This is not to say that critics should never be evaluative and claim that some works of popular culture are more moving or well crafted than others—that is, after all, their job. Yet, to claim such offense at the existence of ancillary products and multimedia appearances is misleadingly naïve. To be so upset by the appearance of these works speaks to the protection of other popular culture as falsely innocent or pure—for a desire to hold up the original recordings as somehow more free of commerce or mediation. This is the fantasy that the biopic belies. It is the shattering of this desire that explains a critic's anger which exceeds the experience of watching an average Hollywood film.

This is something that popular musicians, themselves, often understand far better than critics. Understanding the function of a mythic life-story, their own biographies and interviews with the press are littered with exaggerations and compelling distortions well before their life stories are ever put to screen. Custen writes that the biographical film often works by exaggeration: "Hollywood biography is to history what Caesar's Palace is to architectural history: an enormous, engaging distortion, which after a time convinces us of its own kind of authenticity."<sup>28</sup> In this respect, we ought to understand such

biographical films to be working more in concert with their sources than in opposition to them. Entertainers, themselves, often adjust their life stories for promotional-effect well before their resurrection as the subjects of biographical films. It is not surprising, then, that popular musicians are often happily involved in the making of their own biographical films. Pop stars often serve as the producers of their own projects or appear in these films as an in person “avowal of truth.”<sup>29</sup> A live Tina Turner performance, for instance, punctuates the end of *What’s Love Got to Do With It* (1993), effectively authorizing the narrative that leads up to this final point. Just recently, Joan Jett was actively involved in the promotion and production of *The Runaways* (2010). This film, about Jett’s early band whose work was less accomplished than Jett’s solo material, clearly trades more on the allure of the mythic life story than the artistry of the entertainers. Aretha Franklin is currently recruiting stars and studios to play in her biopic. Far from emerging as a detracting spin-off which takes away from the integrity of the star’s original work, musicians often embrace biopic productions as fully commensurate with the kind of work they are already doing.<sup>30</sup>

Conceived differently, Scott’s rationale for dismissing *La Vie en Rose* as a minor work can be recast as a valid reason to study musical biopics. In the first case, to the extent that films in this genre exhibit common characteristics, this begs attention to a dominant production practice. Regarding Scott’s complaint about the secondary quality of *La Vie en Rose*, this, too, can be considered an exemplary tendency of contemporary cultural production, where the demand for tie-ins and synergy— not to mention the sheer volume of material needed to fill multiplying windows and platforms of exhibition—make repetitive and remediated works (so long as they are not perceived exclusively as such) ideal

for the contemporary marketplace. Scott neglects to account for one of the most compelling factors facing the biopic critic. By simply siding with those who are unimpressed by its generic qualities, he fails to account for the copresence of their enduring popularity.

One of the most curious factors regarding the biopic is its split reception. The biopic is often valued (and devalued) in exaggerated terms— as significantly better, or significantly worse than the average Hollywood film. The biopic figures as one of the least admired film genres, but the one that, proportionally, produces more Academy Award winners than any other. As Joshua Clover writes, the film critic tackling the biopic finds himself “in an inverted world where the worst sort of films, as generally agreed, are in some way the best sort of films, as also generally agreed. All exception, no rule: the category “biopic” turns out to be an empty set.”<sup>31</sup> What registers as emptiness for Clover, however, is better accounted for in terms of the genre’s multipurpose intentions. The biopic is better understood as a polysemic text than an empty one. As described by Angela McRobbie, the multiplicity of meanings accessible in cultural products results in a wide range of consumer investments and interpretations. She writes, “The polysemy of the text rises to the surface provoking and pandering to *different* pleasures, *different* expectations and *different* interpretations.”<sup>32</sup> Polysemy has been increasingly fostered by contemporary Hollywood, which has increasingly produced films geared towards tie-ins, multiple windows of exhibition, and multiple media formats for the same characters and stories. Richard Maltby argues that in this marketplace, there is an identifiable “aesthetics of synergy,” wherein film texts function (beyond their usual



appearance as coherent, linear stories) as entertainment “software” designed to appear in a variety of media.<sup>33</sup>

Film studies is moving towards an understanding of cinema (once defined in terms of its distinctness and specificity) as multi- or inter- media. Scholars are increasingly addressing (instead of simply denying) film’s connection to other popular forms. In a recent *Cinema Journal* article, Rick Altman discusses the way that the discipline of film studies ought to recalibrate from a “centripetal (with film at the center)” to a more “centrifugal” field.<sup>34</sup> He writes,

[W]e worked hard to convince people that the cinema is so different from other forms of expression that it deserves its own place in both the intellectual and the academic world. Today, instead of purifying film studies, we do our best to find ways of integrating one cultural phenomenon after another into the discipline that some still call film studies.<sup>35</sup>

This dissertation represents such a project, positioning film as a popular medium closely connected to other forms and characteristics of mass entertainment, namely, popular music and the star text.<sup>36</sup>

Since this is a study of film genre, it behooves me to situate my study among previous work in this area. Barry Keith Grant provides an acceptably concise and inclusive definition of genre filmmaking: “[G]enre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations.”<sup>37</sup> Bruce Babington and Peter Williams Evans account for these three elements of familiarity in their “structural model of the musical biopic.” They note four typical phases that meet the musical biopic protagonist: (1) rise; (2) conflict and/or affliction (3) retirement and comeback; (4) success and reconciliation. Post-studio era musical biopics— even while assimilating marked stylistic (such as increased cut

rates), social (the increased representation of minority musicians) and thematic (such as the increased depiction of scandal) representational shifts— still, broadly fit Babington and Evan’s description of typical plotting and character formation in this film genre. (The complete “model” of the musical biopic’s “ideal meta-text” is Appendix A)

The fact that the musical biopic is an “institutionally recognized subgenre,” broadly employed and recognized by the film industry, by popular journalists, and fans, qualifies it is a generic distinction I can confidently refer to without recourse to a definitive taxonomy or an extensive debate about what should or should not be classed as a musical biopic.<sup>38</sup>

In her study of action films, Yvonne Tasker maintains that the first steps taken to understand understudied popular genres should *not* necessarily take the traditional route of a summary or overview. Considering the kind of genre criticism best suited for the study of popular genres, Tasker suggests that initial studies should not, by default, be “surveys or taxonomies.”<sup>39</sup> When studying overlooked popular genres, the scholar would do better to “think about popular forms in terms other than those produced by the inappropriate analytical frameworks for high art.”<sup>40</sup>

What Tasker’s approach does facilitate— in lieu of claiming a comprehensive generic survey— is close and careful attention to the individual film texts which constitute a popular genre. Like the survey-model, Tasker finds that genre criticism focused on ideological readings has often bypassed close analysis of individual films. Such critics, guilty of “textual contempt,” often assume that the ideological content of low-brow genres and television programs is so obvious that they can be read with only a “glance.”<sup>41</sup> Tasker counters that,

“To suggest that meanings are obvious, necessarily excludes something of the complexity of popular films. As good products, efficient commodities, films are polysemic, speaking or not speaking to different audiences in different ways.”<sup>42</sup>

Thomas Schatz argues, similarly, for increased attention to the textual characteristics of genre films— something which has been slighted in analyses overcommitted to situating genre films in a determined social or political context. He writes, “while there is certainly a degree to which virtually every mass-mediated cultural artifact can be examined from [a mythical or ideological] perspective, there appears to be a point at which we tend to lose sight of the initial object of inquiry.”<sup>43</sup> Heeding Tasker and Schatz’s calls for more close readings of genre films, my project works from the ground-up: starting from a text-centered approach, moving outward towards a more complete picture of the contemporary musical biopic as a whole. Following this approach, each of my four chapters addresses a different tendency of the contemporary musical biopic. Over four chapters, I study the contemporary musical biopic as a (1) multimedia cultural text that is more invested in synergistic cross-promotion than cultural uplift or fact-driven education; (2) privileged site for the study of the increasing presence of minority stars and stories in the post-classical era; (3) genre heavily invested in genre history— particularly the classical Hollywood musical; (4) genre whose increasingly ambivalent investment in the rise-and-fall narratives of star figures make the musical biopic an ideal site to consider the psychoanalytic foundations of cinema’s representation of the individual. Though each chapter focuses on a sample selection of films, in every case I propose a mode of studying the musical biopic, which is broadly applicable to this understudied genre: a broadly popular but little understood staple of Hollywood filmmaking in the

post-studio era.

## CHAPTER I:

### *A HARD DAY'S NIGHT AND THE POST-STUDIO ERA MUSICAL BIOPIC*

Any broad film genre study must account for the way that a body of work has developed over time. My topic— the post-studio era popular music biopic— has evolved from and within a network of broader genres. In order to situate my subject meaningfully, I first review the classical genres that led to the development of the films I analyze. I briefly detail characteristic studio era backstage musicals and musical biopics, before moving to a close reading of *A Hard Day's Night*, a film that engages and critiques these classical era genres. I position this Beatles film as a musical biopic that strikes a dynamic balance between commercial imperatives and formal inventiveness.

George Custen, the biopic's most prominent scholar, claims that this genre never found a stable niche in the post-studio era marketplace, and that television usurped the prominence of the biography as a popular form in the 1960s and beyond. He writes, "[I]f the 1950s saw a dominance of biographies about performing artists (28%) this curious fact could be seen as the swan song of producers' ideas of 'good entertainment' in a world where vaudeville and the live stage was being usurped by Elvis, the LP record, and television."<sup>1</sup> *A Hard Day's Night* stands as a compelling counter-example to Custen's claim, sitting both dynamically and comfortably in the entertainment context that he outlines. The Beatles film demonstrates the biopic's ability to continuously adapt to the changing marketplace, engaging spectators more interested in rock music than in Broadway show tunes and effectively situating its story in an increasingly mediated, multiplatform marketplace.

As Rick Altman has pointed out, “[I]n order to be recognized as a genre, films must have both a common topic . . . and a common structure, a common way of configuring that topic.”<sup>2</sup> The backstage musical and the musical biopic (self-defining generic designations) point to common topics: stage performances and star entertainers. The structure of the films, however, is less immediately clear. In addition to reviewing the common topics of the musical biopic and backstage musical I will also survey a common tendency of their treatments—to portray their subject with a high degree of reflexivity.

### **The Backstage Musical**

Film scholars have identified a range of subgenres of the Hollywood musical. The definitive text on the subject, Rick Altman’s *The American Film Musical*, includes numerous subtypes that work within this genre, such as the operetta, the singing Western, the fairy tale musical, the show musical, and the folk musical. The subtype that is most relevant to my study is the backstage musical. In musicals of this type, as described by Babington and Evans, the rise of a stage show or entertainer’s career is detailed. Parallel to this story of professional achievement, the lead performer forms an equally successful love relationship.<sup>3</sup> Babington and Evans point out that the backstage musical has long dominated the musical genre: “Many more than half the musicals ever made are of the backstage type – from *The Jazz Singer* and *Broadway Melody of 1929* to *The Rose*, *Cabaret*, *Fame*, and *Nashville*.”<sup>4</sup> One of the most remarkable aspects of the backstage musical has been the persistence of its reflexive elements. Reflexivity— simply defined as the inclusion of formal or thematic elements which point to the cultural work as an illusion or construction— is inherent to

the backstage musical, which centers on the dynamic alternation between events on- and off-stage. Babington and Evans describe the backstage musical as a

meta-theatrical mode . . . an exceedingly sophisticated, self-conscious, self-referential and self-celebratory kind of art. At one level this can be seen as the self-sustaining of the mythology of 'entertainment' by the industry; at another a source of intense formal pleasures in the recognition by audiences of the manipulation of conventions.<sup>5</sup>

*Singin' in the Rain* provides one of the most concise summaries of the effect of the backstage musical's reflexivity. Here, Don (Gene Kelly) is paired with two women, Kathy (Debbie Reynolds) and Lina (Jean Hagen). The film audience is privy to a dynamic contrast between Don's on-stage and back-stage relationships in the production of a show musical. We see that Don and his co-star Lina are coupled in tabloids and on-screen. Behind the scenes, however, Don's true affections are for another woman, Kathy, who also dubs the singing parts for his fake-love-interest. Thus, where Lina is the fake love interest and the phony singer, Kathy is the true singer and true love interest. What is on-stage, and carefully presented to the live audience, is phony and what happens off-stage, privy only to the film spectator, is authentic. The "authenticity effect" of the backstage relationship is made abundantly clear in the scene in which Don woos Kathy by laying bare all the dramatic effects of a sound stage. Don, Kathy, and the audience are all privy to music as effect, to lighting as effect, to wind as merely the work of fans, and so on. Yet, Kathy falls for Don because of the scene's fakery, not in spite of it. That is to say, the very process of laying bare all the showy effects of Hollywood functions to convince us (by contrast) of the truthfulness and authenticity of the love-relationship occurring in the midst and in spite of all these obviously put-on elements.

This scene concisely summarizes a consistent tendency of backstage reflexivity, to reinscribe the effect of Hollywood illusionism and popular entertainment while also showing it as work and fakery. Jane Feuer effectively describes this process as a “pattern of demystification and remystification.”<sup>6</sup> Such reflexivity, which appears to criticize popular entertainment, ultimately functions to redefine and re-energize it. Like Feuer, Altman describes the history of the show musical as increasingly reflexive, but always to affirmative ends, shattering illusion only to be more entertaining and more romantic. He writes,

As early as 1941, the conventional but simplistic syntax of the show musical was specifically contested through foregrounding. MGM’s *The Ziegfeld Girl* begins with a regular litany of backstage commonplaces—not naturalized or concealed, but consistently emphasized, as if they were the film’s true subject. Legs are ‘valuables’ [and so on] . . . During the late forties, numerous major films followed this reflexive route, foregrounding and undercutting the conventions of the show musical syntax only in order to reaffirm them all the more convincingly.<sup>7</sup>

As I will survey later, *A Hard Day’s Night* and numerous post-classical musical biopics also works reflexively, in ways that dynamically continue (and revise) prior musical biopics and backstage musicals.

### **The Classical Era Musical Biopic**

The musical biopic can be considered a subtype of the backstage musical, encompassing those films based on the life-story of an entertainer, and excluding those featuring fictional protagonists. Altman and Tibbetts exhibit outlying evaluations of the classical musical biopic’s value. Where Altman situates the



musical biopic as the lowest variation of the classical musical genre—albeit a site of missed potential— Tibbetts makes an enthusiastic appeal for its cultural and artistic value.

Altman complains of the ease with which the musical biopic folds the process of music-making into broader narratives of romantic coupling, usually at the expense of precisely that which the biographical film promises to offer: a truthful account of the entertainer's life. He writes, "Time after time, biographical events are ignored in order to make the semantic givens of the biopic conform to the syntax of the show musical. Music must never be seen as something one does solely to make a living. To make music is to make love; to make love is to inspire art."<sup>8</sup> The musical biopic's breezy play with historical fact is, in fact, acknowledged by critics who find more value in the genre. John C. Tibbetts acknowledges this very quality of the Chopin biopic *A Song to Remember* (1945) while also making a case for the effective drama of such distortions and exaggerations. He identifies the film's most compelling moment as a scene which upsets half its viewers due its historical distortions and inspires others because of its dynamic representation of perseverance and performance:

[T]he film's casual concern for historical and biographical accuracy . . . outraged other commentators. Particularly notorious was a wholly fabricated penultimate sequence wherein the disease-ravaged Chopin embarks on a suicidal concert tour to aid Polish freedom fighters. He hunches over the piano. He sweats profusely. He labors on and on in an increasing frenzy. He coughs spasmodically. Suddenly, a spot of blood spatters onto the keyboard. . . .[sic] That shot of Technicolor blood splashing across the snow-white keys has lingered long in the memories of many viewers, critics, and musicians and music historians for who the film has acquired the

status of high kitsch (admittedly, the same holds true for me, who, as a startled ten-year old, first saw it many years ago on television).<sup>9</sup>

Tibbetts' chapter on this film, "A Song Remembered: Frederic Chopin Goes to War," also engages with a central complaint of the musical biopic's detractors: that these Hollywood films, still beholden to conventional narratives are rarely 'about the music,' but, rather, about the maintenance of popular ideology.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the central tendency of the musical biopic to correlate musical production with romantic coupling, some biopics also set up additional parallels, such as the relationship between music and patriotism. For example, the performances of Glenn Miller, Jolson, and Jane Froman for the World War II troops (and, excepting Jolson, the horrible accidents that befall them while serving the nation) are indisputably the central point of emphasis in the plots of *The Glenn Miller Story* (1953), *Jolson Sings Again* (1949), and *With a Song in My Heart* (1952).

To analyze an example in greater detail, the George M. Cohan biopic *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) shows how the classical musical biopic served many more functions than simply narrating the life-story of an individual performer. The success of this biographical film (ostensibly about the American composer/performer's amazing run of Broadway hits from the 1900s through the 1930s) can be explained more by timeliness than by the particularity of its presentation of Cohan's music and life-story. With a release date in early 1942, just after the attack of Pearl Harbor in late 1941, the composer's patriotic World War I era hits "Over There" and "You're a Grand Old Flag" were newly relevant and ready for revival. The rhetorical high-point of the film excerpts a scene from

his starring role in the 1937 Rodgers and Hart musical “I’d Rather Be Right.” The emphatic performance of lines added to address current global conflict—“We’ll take [France] back from Hitler and put ants in his ‘Japants’ and that’s *for* the record” — underscore the imperative of producers to make this a timely World War II era film.

*Yankee* traces Cohan’s rise to fame from his days as a young boy when he traveled as part of The Four Cohans, his family’s vaudeville act.<sup>11</sup> As George successfully capitalizes on his superior talents at a very early age, it is his own egotism that provides the film’s earliest conflict. Cohan outgrows his youthful cockiness and serves his country as a diligent patriot. The film’s treatment of the composer as an American icon is, in fact, explicitly discussed when Cohan’s producer Sam tries to recruit a more highbrow Broadway singer, Fay Templeton, to perform his songs. Fay initially resists, saying she will only perform in a “quiet, dignified musical play,” and that Cohan’s work represents “loud, vulgar, flag waving.” Sam takes Fay to task for her elitism, explaining his understanding of American taste and convincing her to “hitch your wagon to his star right now.” Cohan, Sam argues, is “the whole darn country squeezed into a pair of pants . . . [he] invented the success story. And every American loves it because it happens to be his own private dream. He’s found the mainspring in the Yankee clock: ambition, pride, and patriotism.”

This summary of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* illustrates many of the central characteristics of the classical composer biopic: an aggrandized lead subject, presented as an ideal American and man: a moral role models for the mass audience. Tibbetts describes Paul Muni’s performance as Chopin in similar terms, describing the studio’s aggrandizing and conventionalized treatment of

him: “Chopin’s masculine agency must be bolstered up, even at the expense of historical accuracy.”<sup>12</sup> Cohan was also similarly portrayed by Cagney. The composer, in fact, collaborated with the studio by citing certain facts of his life—multiple marriages, opposition to labor unions, and disputes with popular critics—that would be best left off screen.<sup>13</sup> The producers concurred on these omissions and the film depicted, according to Cohan’s daughter, “the kind of life that Daddy would like to have lived!”<sup>14</sup>

This kind of aggrandizing, idealized portrayal broadly characterizes the classical era biopic, spanning sports films, war films, and inventor films as well. Carolyn Anderson describes the Lou Gehrig character of *Pride of the Yankees* as an “idealized common man.”<sup>15</sup> Babington and Evans concisely define the “formulaic” character formation of the classical musical biopic as working with the “average legend,” figures that were exemplary in both extraordinary (artistic achievement; financial success; national service) and ordinary (love relationships) ways.<sup>16</sup> In place of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* and *A Song to Remember*, I could have easily discussed other films. *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), *Night and Day* (1946), *Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946), and *The Benny Goodman Story* (1955) all feature idealized men who find romance at the same time that they find their musical voice. By analyzing the Cohan and Chopin films, I cover both Tin Pan Alley and classical music genres, demonstrating how musical biopics (in both popular and highbrow musical genres) present similar visions of love, masculinity, nation, and popular music making. As Tibbetts details, producers of classical composer biopics took pains to present these films as working with popular music.<sup>17</sup> The conventional characteristics of the classical musical biopic

constitute an important context against which the innovations of *A Hard Day's Night* can be measured.

In rarer instances, the classical era musical biopic was more reflexive. The second of the very popular Al Jolson biographical films is the most well known of the reflexive studio era biopics. *Jolson Sings Again*, the 1949 sequel to *The Jolson Story* (1946), makes extensive reference to the making of the first film during the second. Here, the production of the first film is prominently featured as the highlight of Jolson's later career. The inclusion of *The Jolson Story* in the diegesis of *Jolson Sings Again* leads to an unusual dramatic encounter: Larry Parks, as Jolson in the sequel, meets himself, explicitly identified as "actor Larry Parks." This unusual scene lays bare the performative bases of the biopic. The genre's reliance on fictionalization and exaggeration is also addressed openly by the star protagonist of *Jolson Sings Again*. When the making of the first Jolson film is discussed, the star encourages *The Jolson Story's* producers to play fast and loose with his biography: "Let's agree about one thing at the start, boys. I don't think anybody cares about the facts of my life; about names and places. I'll give you a mess of them. You juggle them any way you like." The archival work of scholars such as John C. Tibbetts has revealed the willing participation of popular musicians, such as Cohan, in the creation of highly fictionalized biographical films whose primary function— to promote a populist persona alongside the music— overrode a commitment to factual accuracy.<sup>18</sup> *Jolson Sings Again* moves this aspect of the classical biopic from behind-the-scenes to center-stage. Like *Singin' in the Rain*, the Jolson film includes elements within the diegesis that point to its constructive and illusionist bases. Such reflexive representations may first appear to compromise the romantic and entertaining qualities of these films,

but, ultimately, serve to promote these values even more. As Rick Altman argues, *Jolson Sings Again*:

seeks to guarantee the authenticity of screen biographies of stage stars through the strikingly paradoxical technique of foregrounding the very technology that supposedly distances the filmed stage star . . . *Jolson Sings Again* actually shows Jolson recording his songs while the actor who is to play him on screen mouths the words. While this scene thoroughly lays bare the biopic's devices, it also lays the groundwork for a complete reinstatement of the genre.<sup>19</sup>

Altman accounts for the effectiveness of revealing the “technological basis of the biopic” in terms of this film genre’s vitality. I agree with this point, and believe it can be pushed even further: to account for the musical biopic’s shared project with the popular music industry, which is also dependent on the technological basis of its form and the promotion of star personas in addition to recordings.

Popular music in the twentieth century is inextricably tied to the development of recording and playback technology. Since the 1930s, musical consumption has moved from individual performances in the home (or public performance spaces) to the consumption of recorded performances of professional musicians. Retrospectively, we understand music before mass electronic media (when sheet music was dominant mass medium) as a “live” performing art. Yet, the emergence of radio, phonography, and the popular music industry ought to be properly credited with the invention of “liveness” itself. While literally ending the fact of music-as-live, in the twentieth century, the emergence of these media effectively found the discourse of liveness which defines the consumption of popular music. In-person performances of star

musicians are coveted and celebrated due to their mass mediated popularity (of star images, popular recordings, and, even, 'live' performances) and the very scarcity of liveness that this entails. The dominance of recorded sound effectively creates and fetishizes the category of the live performance. While such performances constitute a tiny percentage of twentieth century musical consumption, the live experience is still considered the most desired, authentic means of experiencing popular music.

A facile solution to this 'problem' would simply be to heavily market and charge extortionate prices for live appearances. Instead, the industry has succeeded in finding ways to actually build a sense of liveness into mass reproduced recordings. As the media which convey the visual and physical dimensions of musical performance, film and television assume a significant role in effecting the "liveness" of recorded music. Ironically, then, the more mediated musical performances become, the more a discourse of authenticity and liveness defines their presentation.

While Altman stops short of pitching the film's relevance at this scale, *Jolson Sings Again's* investment in reflexivity does not just work to reinstate the cultural popularity of the film musical but to maintain the status of and discourses attendant to recorded popular music. The popular music industry is, in fact, even more dependent on the tenuous principle that the Jolson film promotes: more-mediation-equals-more-authenticity. Like Altman, Babington and Evans read *Jolson Sings Again* as a film more about filmmaking than popular music. In a subchapter titled, "the glorification of cinema" they write, "It is a paradox celebrated by *Jolson Sings Again* that the presence of Al Jolson is most fully embodied in the cinema in two films where he is absent."<sup>20</sup> Altman and

Babington and Evans miss how complimentary the film's reflexive-redemptive portrayal is to discourses surrounding the production and consumption of popular music. With this view in mind, *Jolson Sings Again* looks less like a uniquely cinematic representation and more like a popular form which must be studied in connection to other mass entertainment media.

*Jolson Sings Again* succeeds in representing popular music performance in a sophisticated, reflexive way which does not compromise the film's entertainment value or commercial imperatives. Still, it constitutes an uneven exemplar of my claim that one of the primary functions of the musical biopic is to maintain the status of pop music as authentic and live, as it also (rather self-evidently) grew increasingly mediated. This is, after all, a film about a musical star whose heyday was long since past. While the Jolson films were reasonably successful, Hollywood's practice of producing films about stars past proved to be a poor decision economically. The investment of these films in music as historical and nostalgic is, as one might expect, matched by accordingly conservative plots, themes, and social visions. As Thomas Elsaesser points out, the biographical film, in response to the Production Code, often featured conventional American role models.<sup>21</sup> The socially conservative legacy of the genre meant that the musical biopic, even in the 1960s, often reached back to musical genres no longer current with a contemporary audience and, as it often turned out, no longer profitable.

Custen writes that the biographical film (including the musical biopic) long remained a curiously antiquated genre, perpetually 'behind the times' in its choice of musical genres and time periods:



It took at least two generations for the cultural content of the world outside the frame to catch up with the biopic. . . . Long past the time when the studio mode of production was in good operating order, Hollywood still produced major hits (like *Funny Girl* [1968]) that drew upon this 'old' culture.<sup>22</sup>

In Custen's view, the biopic (as it moved into the 1960s and beyond) was defined by nostalgia and depictions of "'old' culture." Like Molly Brost—the only other dissertator to tackle the musical biopic—I argue against Custen's claim that "the biopic seems, since the 1960s, to have faded away to a minor form."<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, Custen's claim contains truths-by-degrees that Brost overlooks.

It is not true that the biopic did not figure as a significant contemporary genre, but it is accurate to say that (as Custen emphasizes) it was slow to adjust and adapt to the contemporary audience. Likewise, it is an exaggeration to claim that the genre moved exclusively to television, but biopics (whether designed for television or cinema) since the 1960s display textual characteristics that mark them as influenced by television (ranging from the fragmented, fast pace of *A Hard Day's Night* to the investment in scandal of *Man in the Mirror*).

The Beatles film continues the tradition of reflexive representation as seen in musicals such as *Singin' in the Rain* and, in a more rare example, musical biopics such as *Jolson Sings Again*. Here, as in its predecessors, *A Hard Day's Night* authenticates its subjects by openly granting their participation in a mass industry based on mediation and mass reproduction. The Beatles film dramatically increases the extent to which such mediation is foregrounded, while also introducing representational shifts which mark *A Hard Day's Night* more definitely as a post-studio era musical biopic. The Beatles film is clearly addressed at the youth market, as it moves away from the sober, self-serious, and

educative function that defined classical era musical biopics (including the Jolson films), and toward a design aimed solely at entertainment and consumerism. Textually, *A Hard Day's Night* is fragmented and frenetic, often resembling the design of popular songs more than a traditionally narrative film: numerous sequences stand out as lively self-contained three-to-four minute sequences. Featuring The Beatles themselves at the peak of their popularity, *A Hard Day's Night* abandons the nearly universal feature of the musical biopic to combine a search for love alongside the production of popular music. Instead, *A Hard Day's Night* foregrounds the love of fans as the primary relationship motivating the film. Paradoxically, this makes The Beatles film more honest or realistic, and more shamelessly commercial.

### ***A Hard Day's Night* and the Post-Studio Era Musical Biopic**

In order for musical biopics to be successful, they must negotiate their investment in the lighter versus the heavier half of their subject: are entertainers' lives enviable and exciting, or are they tragic figures, who pay a cost for their greatness? This implied question also poses a consideration of this trade-off: is the possession of such talent and the pleasure of performing worth the scrutiny of the celebrity's life? This balance can also be discussed at the level of form and content, with each aspect of the genre's hybrid status aligning more with one half. The musical is associated more with expressive flights of fancy and formal flourishes, while the biopic promises a more grounded, educative representation of historical individuals and their inspiring life stories. In Tibbetts' words, the classical music biopic often worked with this trade-off, "sacrificing biographical

detail to the glory of music itself."<sup>24</sup> In this equation the biographical and the musical are pitted against one another, with emphasis on one detracting from the integrity of the other.

The title song of *A Hard Day's Night* concisely expresses the dynamic tension central to so many musical biopics: how to represent musical composition and performance as expressive and fun while also delivering on the promise of biography to show the difficulties of the entertainer's life and the labor involved in the production of popular music. This song contrasts the tension between a day spent "working like a dog" and evenings with a partner that redeem the day's difficulties:

It's been a hard day's night, and I been working like a dog  
It's been a hard day's night, I should be sleeping like a log  
But when I get home to you I find the things that you do  
Will make me feel alright

In this familiar ritual of many pop music narratives, a satisfying relationship compensates for the otherwise unbearable drudgery of life. The film's use of this song logically extends the already present 'love conquers all' discourse of pop music. Yet, pop music does not just perform an instructional function regarding love, but a substitutive one as well.

The ecstatic experience described by popular music is not something that the listener simply puts in dialogue with their own love relationships. Rather, the aesthetic pleasure to be had in the songs themselves can stand in for worldly experiences. When the pop song works at this level, it is less a literal engagement with the subject of love, and more an assumption of its affective equivalence. In such a case, music does not mediate the relationship between the listener and his loves, but, rather, kindles a relationship between the listener and

the material. It is this kind of consumerist relationship that *A Hard Day's Night* aims to effect in the opening scene, featuring the film's title track. Here, the song plays loudly over a comedic sequence: the band is mobbed by adoring fans and, referencing the playfulness of silent comedy, The Beatles elude their pursuers via a series of stunts and gags. In a representational choice very uncharacteristic for a musical biopic, The Beatles' run is accompanied by their own non-diegetic music. While it is quite common for musical biopics to employ orchestrated, non-diegetic motifs— *Coal Miner's Daughter*, for instance, repeatedly uses a version of its title-track with classical instrumentation— in this case, the use of an entire, original track, with loudly and clearly mixed vocals stands out as an unusual generic choice.

The frontloaded, foregrounded, non-naturalistic use of this song aligns *A Hard Day's Night* with other rocksploitation films of the late 50s and early 60s. The juvenile delinquent film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) famously used "Rock Around the Clock" cross-promotionally, with this song played over the film's opening credits. Serge Denisoff credits *Blackboard Jungle* as the first film to mix the title-track so loudly:

The movie's soundtrack, according to producer Milt Gabler, was successful because *Blackboard Jungle* increased the decibel level to new highs. Roman Kozak reported, 'Prior film soundtracks had a much deadlier sound, with the orchestra muted in the background. But here the heavily rhythmic recording just jumped out at the audience.'<sup>25</sup>

*A Hard Day's Night*, like *Blackboard Jungle*, makes clear its investment in "two-way promotion" with such a front-loaded narrative placement of the title-track.<sup>26</sup>

From this opening frame and song performance, the film breaks from the 'realist' conventions of the popular music biopic, which used music (especially with

lyrics) more sparingly, and in keeping with principles of continuity, restricted the lead subjects' music to performance spaces and recording studios.

The playful fakery of this opening sequence is emphasized not only by the asynchronous presentation of performers and their songs, but by the clearly evident staging of many episodes within the sequence. In a campy homage to silent comedy, The Beatles perform a series of physical routines. In a sequence played at an accelerated speed, the band tries to elude their fans by hiding in phone booths or applying mustaches for disguise. All the while, they boyishly grin, clearly enjoying the ritual of being chased by their adoring fans. Paired with this introduction, the title song to *A Hard Day's Night* does not work to make viewers think of their own love relationships. Instead, The Beatles song (and their obviously put-on 'escape') functions as a biographical performance of their own story. Here, we see both the 'work' of being The Beatles— as the band is forced to elude their out-of-control mass audience— and its 'fun' as they participate in the chase as a playful ritual. Through this performance, The Beatles position themselves as the redemptive lover in the song, trying to convince the consumer to buy the transcendent experience they sell. The chase sequence portrays the fan's rapturous obsession with the group and the band's supposed shared enjoyment of this bond. The balanced power relationship portrayed by the chase sequence also encourages the spectator to identify as a lover rather than a consumer. The pursuer and pursued is a character configuration familiar to the language of love, and one which aggrandizes the relationship of consumer and product to a falsely equal exchange. Further, just as the oppressiveness of work is minimized by the love relationship within the song, the status of work within the production of The Beatles phenomenon is

minimized in the film. This sequence works both to recuperate and romanticize the idea of ‘work’, convincing us that, at every level of production and work far beyond stage performances (studio recording, press appearances, television appearances, daily transportation and housing arrangements), that the labor involved in being The Beatles is just as fun for its members as the consumption of their music and films is for the mass audience.

At the same time, though, the dynamic and obvious fakery of the sequence draws attention to itself and the transparency of the film’s efforts to present a realistic representation of the band. The life story of this group is obviously a put on, a comedy, and, at the most general level, a film clearly marked as such. As *A Hard Day’s Night* continues, the film repeatedly parodies conventions of the musical biopic. While Custen argues that “the formulaic reflexivity of star biopics that characterized the postwar era failed to find a public in the post-studio era,” *A Hard Day’s Night* exemplifies a high degree of reflexivity and displays numerous characteristics that define it as an ideal post studio era film— far from the nostalgic, patriotic, historical, educational film that long defined the musical biopic.<sup>27</sup>

David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson’s landmark study of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985) finds that a dominant set of stylistic characteristics and storytelling principles of studio era American filmmaking have long defined popular movies. They focus on narrative continuity and closure; character depth and psychology; and an expectation of ‘realism’ as the defining characteristics of Hollywood storytelling.<sup>28</sup> While some have argued that this study has drastically overstated the dominance of similar features in studio era Hollywood, the classical musical biopic is the kind of genre which

provides support evidence for *Classical Hollywood Cinema's* broad summation of popular filmmaking.<sup>29</sup> The classical musical biopic consistently worked within dominant paradigms of character coherence, development, and resolution. Critics have noted how a demand for realism in the musical biopics has tended to elevated biographical realism as a priority over the expressive, imaginative qualities of the musical. As Babington and Evans once complained of the backstage musical (including the musical biopic),

conservative producers . . . thinking of conservative audiences, found in it a type of musical in which no imaginative grasp of convention was required. All the singing and dancing could be realistically motivated by the fact that the characters were professional singers and/or dancers either performing or rehearsing.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the musical biopic circumvents the obvious fakery of many other musical modes by centering on a life story and limiting music to professional, realistic arenas. In these respects, the classical musical biopic exemplifies the tenets of a classical film, making use of the dominant form of storytelling outlined by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson. *A Hard Day's Night*, rather than working within these conventions, presents a model for a radically different kind of musical biopic. The reflexivity of *The Beatles* film situates it in the history of the musical biopic, but it is unusually inventive as both a film and product. Its design (especially the decision to cast *The Beatles*, themselves, as the stars of their story) is unusually playful and imaginative. At the same time, the film fully capitalizes on multiplatform marketing and the tie-in, which would also increasingly define post-studio era filmmaking.

*A Hard Day's Night* is a transitional film in the history of the musical. At a time when most Hollywood musicals were underperforming, and the industry's

audience was growing younger, this Beatles film is one of the first works to capitalize on the changing market by dynamically representing a popular musical group on film. Prior to *The Beatles* film, the popular film industry had struggled to find a place for the musical biopic in the changing industry.

Following a popular postwar series of musical biopics, centering on the enormous success of the Al Jolson biopics in 1946 and 1949, the number of films produced in this genre diminished rapidly in the 1950s. Where the five year period from 1945-1950 had seen nine musical biopics, the following ten years, from 1951-1960, produce fewer films in this genre.<sup>31</sup> From 1960 to 1970, this number declines even more rapidly. *Your Cheatin' Heart* (1964), *Funny Girl* (1968), and *Star!* (1968) are among the small handful of musical biopics produced in this decade. The diminishing popularity of this genre can be explained by a variety of factors: patriotic subjects (such as George M. Cohan or Jane Froman) were no longer as timely, filmmakers increasingly turned to racier content, and the musical forms (jazz, classical, Tin Pan Alley, and Broadway musicals) that these biopics narrativized were declining in popularity.<sup>32</sup> The emergence of rock'n'roll as the dominant popular music is probably the single most important factor in the waning production of musical biopics in the postwar era. The industry had made various efforts at accommodating or integrating this new popular music. *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) is the first film to feature a rock soundtrack, and Elvis begins his film career with *Love Me Tender* (1956), but *A Hard Day's Night* is the first film to successfully combine the biopic with rock'n'roll. Other rocksploitation films of the late 50s incongruously combined staid productions with the portrayal of rebellious teen music. *A Hard Day's Night* is the first film to make this connection not just literally, but in a



fuller way: the film's tone and style embody the values and spirit of the new popular music.

At the time of the film's release, Andrew Sarris identified *A Hard Day's Night* as "the brilliant crystallization of such diverse cultural particles as the pop movie, rock'n'roll, cinema-verité, the nouvelle vague, free cinema, the affectedly hand-held camera, frenzied cutting, the cult of the sexless sub-adolescent, the semi-documentary and studied spontaneity."<sup>33</sup> This film breaks from the conventions of earlier musical biopics by violating classical Hollywood editing conventions (certain segments register as filmic constructions as much as musical performances) and parodying narrative conventions of the genre (Ringo's supposed inferiority complex is never meant to be taken seriously). While *A Hard Day's Night* varies from previous incarnations of the genre in these cases, other characteristics point to a greater degree of continuity between this film and earlier examples of the genre.

*A Hard Day's Night* can also be discussed in terms of *Jolson Sings Again* (1949) and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). All three of these films work self-reflexively, and, in each case, the process of pulling back the curtain functions to reinforce the myth of entertainment. In *A Hard Day's Night* we see that The Beatles have as much fun behind the scenes as on-stage; in *Jolson Sings Again*, the making of the Jolson biopic reenergizes his commitment to performing; and in *Singin' in the Rain*, stagecraft is laid bare as the phony singer/love-interest is replaced by an authentic singer/love-interest.

The Beatles film, like *Jolson Sings Again*, emphasizes the performative aspects of the biographical film. Yet, each film emphasizes different aspects of the production in balancing the movement between "demystification and

remystification.” While the Jolson films explicitly point to the gap between the star subject and the actor playing him as it maintains the illusion of realistic cinema worlds and plot development, *The Beatles* film sidesteps the problem of actors playing musical stars, but (in exchange) frequently punctures the illusion of the cinematic world (with asynchronous soundtracks and non-continuity editing) in a story that is also comedic rather than realistic. While George Custen notes a tendency of classical era biopics to feature “in person avowals of truth” (Babe Ruth’s appearance as himself in *Pride of the Yankees* increases the apparent authenticity of Lou Gehrig’s life-story), *Hard Day’s Night* works to exactly the opposite effect, as the ‘real band’ appears as themselves only to play with and elude the truth rather than straightforwardly attest to it.<sup>34</sup> While biopics, like backstage musicals, promise to show the work involved in the creation of art, this must be reconciled with a seemingly oppositional function, what Jane Feuer describes as “a pattern of demystification and remystification,” to ultimately reinscribe the efficacy of the entertainment industry after taking spectators behind-the-scenes.<sup>35</sup>

I will start by analyzing the elements of the film which suggest a reading of *A Hard Day’s Night* as an innovative film that takes on and revises numerous aspects of the musical biopic. Without expanding much on this suggestion, Michael Atkinson points to this film as one of the most significant (perhaps ‘the best’) musical biopics, but also one of the most understudied and least understood. He writes, “Few viewers then or now have bothered to recognize what an odd, metatextual creature Richard Lester’s movie is,” with *The Beatles* “playing themselves” in a film “structured around the bristling contradictions between biography, documentary, and fiction.”<sup>36</sup>

Though my project treats film history as the primary object of analysis, the history of popular music also figures centrally in this discussion. *A Hard Day's Night* is probably understudied by cinema scholars precisely because it is seen more as a musical-film than a film-musical, as a cultural object with more to do with The Beatles and rock history than film history. This opposition between the connected industries of popular music and popular film is a false dichotomy. To understand how *A Hard Day's Night* varies from the more conventional biopic, in terms of both style and values, it is useful to appeal to historical understandings of popular music as well. Lawrence Grossberg's definition of "rock culture" does as much (and does more specific work) in explaining the difference between The Beatles film versus prior musical biopics. Grossberg defines "rock culture" as "a cultural logic or mode of productivity that can be described in the following terms: affective (rather than ideological); differentiating (us versus them); a celebration of fun (where fun takes on different meanings depending on what it is opposing)."<sup>37</sup> The primacy of these values, of affect, of differentiation, and of fun go a long way in clarifying what is different about *A Hard Day's Night* versus the classical musical biopic.

An aura of education and seriousness defines the classical composer biopic, which defined the genre in the studio era. This tone, as I have outlined above, extends beyond the value of the musician's work to the instructiveness of their life-stories, as ideal men and ideal patriots. *A Hard Day's Night* is starkly different than this description, parodying the responsibility so valued in the studio era; to do this, the film works dialogically, engaging the interests of more conventional biopics. The Beatles film plays on the same central thematic interests that would inform a more literal biopic— generational conflict and

nationalism are both addressed in a playful rather than a sanctimonious tone, often in very compacted scenes. The consistency of its attack on the staid musical biopic genre should not be so surprising, with the knowledge that The Beatles themselves were reportedly quite familiar with and wanted to work in opposition to the typical characteristics of this genre. As cited in a *New York Times* interview:

The Beatles were adamant that they did not want to make a cheap, moronic rock musical, 'We won't do a rags-to-riches story,' they maintained. 'Nor the one about the record being smuggled into the studio in the last reel and put on by mistake . . .' another added. 'Yeah, we've seen that one.'" Before filming began, producers agreed that "There must be no romance" and that the musicians be treated, as in life, as stars.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, The Beatles approached the musical biopic with the desire to perform within this genre in a way that also broke away from the sincere and aggrandizing mode. Yet, their critical orientation to the genre can be understood in terms of another dominant performance style within contemporary rock music. Grossberg devised the term "authentic inauthenticity" to account for this defensive, apparently contradictory strategy that has become common to contemporary rock. He writes, "the only authenticity is to know and even admit that you are not being authentic, to fake it without faking the fact that you are faking it."<sup>39</sup> The consistent foregrounding of performance in *A Hard Day's Night* is described well by Grossberg's term.

Because the pacing of the film is so fast— and it occupies generic categories that invite easy dismissal (the musical-film, the celebrity-vehicle, the tie-in-film, and the comedy)— it is easy to miss the consistency of its revisionist

work. A comedic encounter between The Beatles and an elderly passenger on a train is representatively rich and playful, as this goofy scene also contains a great deal of quick witted, sophisticated generic work. This scene plays with the seriousness accorded to generational conflict in films such as *The Jazz Singer*. While these differences are usually hashed out gradually (or ploddingly!) over the course of an entire film, *A Hard Day's Night* introduces generational conflict with jarring abandon.

Where the tortured relationship between the lead protagonist and his father is normally a lengthy plot point, the convention of the Oedipal complex and conflict is simply introduced and parodied here. After occupying the same train car, within seconds, the band playfully conflicts with an elderly passenger. When the band, superficially, dismisses this character for being "clean" and boring, the grandfather retorts, "I fought in the war for your sort." Changing sexual mores are also fleetingly engaged as the band asks the appalled older man to "give us a kiss." If the comedic, non-naturalistic quality of the film had not been conveyed adequately by these points of conflict, the editing breaks from continuity standards in staging a number of generational encounters between the band and the "little old man." The Beatles continue to tease the elderly passenger in a four shot sequence with abrupt, non-continuity edits. Following their departure from the train car, the band suddenly appears (as if mugging for a press photo) with all four faces pressed against the transparent door, then, suddenly outside the train; they ask the old man, while biking and running, "Hey Mister, can we have our ball back?," before, finally, walking past the train car carrying George sideways. This quick succession of single-shot gags underscores the comedic, anti-realist tone of the film.

The musical biopic, historically, worked more in the manner of the biopic than the musical—with the obligation to realism constraining the genre’s ability to incorporate inventive or imaginative song sequences. *A Hard Day’s Night* reverses this tendency by rejecting a sober commitment to biographical realism in favor of more playful use of the film medium. This tendency is most visible in the film’s dynamic and obviously anti-realist editing in song sequences. The unusual use of the title track in the introductory sequence is one example, but the film continues to defamiliarize song performances even in sequences that feature the band playing their instruments and singing. In keeping with the film’s parodic and playful tone, these scenes break from the tendency of most musical biopics to present such moments as ‘realistic’ and ‘live’. Instead, even synchronous performances break from continuity editing, aiming for dynamism more than realism. The film’s second song illustrates this tendency.

The Beatles, passing time on a train ride, decide spontaneously to play “Love Me Do.” At a narrative level, the relatively sudden performance of a song during leisure time is an expected and familiar plot point for a musical. Stylistic choices, however, defamiliarize this convention, pointing to its constructedness and falsity while also enabling a playful performance. The setting, a baggage area, already conveys a sense of unreality: both a forbidden and impractical location, the flimsy rational explanation for this staging choice (it is a defiant and private location) is clearly not as significant as the fact that it makes for an unexpected and dynamic setting. The Beatles’ transition from card-playing to performing is effected without any narrative motivation. As with the title song, the band’s music begins playing as non-diegetic music, functioning in the manner of the rock score; then, suddenly, the band has instruments and the song

is both synchronous and diegetic. The abruptness of this transition renders these otherwise realistic performance shots as strange and put-on. Framing and camera movements are also restless and playful. The persistent use of mobile framing adds further to the tone of elusiveness and fun. Thus, in this sequence as in the introduction, the plasticity of the film medium is openly embraced and foregrounded. This tendency places *A Hard Day's Night* more in concert with the musical than the biopic. Yet, following broader shifts in the evolution of film style in the post-studio era, the musicalized world of The Beatles is portrayed more via unusual framings and intensified editing instead of the careful staging of fantastical elements within the mise-en-scene (e.g. *Gigi* [1958]). (I discuss the stylistic differences between classical and post-classical musicals in greater detail in Chapter 3).

Another unusual aspect of *A Hard Day's Night's* treatment of musical performance is its foregrounding of the recording industry. As numerous critics have pointed out, the making and consuming of popular music is embedded with technology and the experience of recorded sound. Still, a crucial distinction persists between film and music. Film is an inherently technological form, constituted wholly by its recording and mass reproducibility. Popular music (especially rock) trades on the live performance as the most vital and authentic mode of consumption, not in spite of but because it is predominantly consumed via mass reproduced forms.

Rock music is defined by this sustained contradiction: the fetishization of the live performance paired with the predominance of mass-produced recordings as the dominant modes of production and consumption. The prevalence of the recording over the live performance is quite clear and obvious

once one, ignoring the discourses and mythologies surrounding these practices, looks clearly and only at the material practices of musical consumption. It is not surprising, then, that some scholars have taken a debunking approach to the studies of the place of liveness in rock culture. Theodore Gracyk, for instance, argues that the predominance of recording and playback technology is so central to rock music that we ought not consider it a performance:

The vast majority of the time, the audience for rock music listens to speakers delivering recordings. . . [R]ock's primary materials are often the available recording and playback equipment. Guitars, pianos, voices, and so on became secondary materials. Consequently, rock music is not essentially a performing art, no matter how much time rock musicians spend practicing on their instruments or playing live).<sup>40</sup>

In *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Philip Auslander qualifies that if Gracyk has the practices of musical consumption half right, his materialist approach obscures the importance of the discursive place of liveness in "rock culture." While in Gracyk's view any representation of the musical artist as a live performer instead of a recording artist, is "guilty of a pernicious misrepresentation," Auslander counters that "The problem with Gracyk's argument is that most rock *recordings* are guilty of the same misrepresentation. Only a few rock recordings foreground the artifice of their studio construction; most are made to sound like performances that could have taken place, even if they really didn't (and couldn't)."<sup>41</sup> The centrality of liveness in the face of all this mass produced, canned entertainment is not a misrecognition on the part of fans, but something that the industry actively cultivates.



The story of The Beatles is instructive in this instance as well, as their celebrity was widely cultivated more via television, press, radio, and records than their live performances. Nonetheless, appearances of The Beatles (and their screaming teeny-bopper fans) occupy a central place in their legend. Interestingly, The Beatles were never particularly known as a great live band, despite the centrality of the hysterical fans to their legend. Screaming fans reportedly made their concerts incoherent experiences, as those who went to see The Beatles 'for their music' were thwarted by the young fans, who rendered concerts inaudible by this celebration of contact with the star group. Such ritualized performances of fandom were, of course, already energized by the consumption of mass reproduced versions of their products.<sup>42</sup> As such, Beatles concerts, like the film, traded greatly on appeals other than the music itself. One may expect (with the idea of product differentiation in mind) that a feature film would attract the fan through significantly different points of interest than the live performance. However, at a basic level, the appeal of the unheard concert is the same as the film— focused on personality and performance more than the sound of the music.<sup>43</sup> It is little wonder, then, that *A Hard Day's Night* opens with a scene featuring the screaming fans pursuing the band, presumably just outside a performance hall. The film's privileging of the screaming fan models a mode of musical consumption that emphasizes personality and celebrity.

Typical of the film musical, it is crucial that we see scenes of these fans outside of performance spaces. Thus, the film effectively incorporates a known element of their live performances while also compensating for the film-as-recording by showing us the same fans performing (not just in concert halls) but out in a broader, social stage. Musical biopics negotiate this gap between the

experience of music as a mass reproducible commodity versus a live encounter with actual performers, while also maintaining a tone of the authentic and spontaneous. This is a shared project of both the musical biopic and the popular music industry: the inscription of liveness in mass media. Auslander reminds us that “liveness” is a direct result of the emergence of recorded media. He writes, “[T]he very concept of live performance presupposes that of reproduction-- that the live can exist only within an economy of reproduction.”<sup>44</sup> Jane Feuer makes a similar claim about the classical era musical film. According to Feuer, the musical is the genre most devoted to blurring the line between live and recorded performance: “The Hollywood musical as a genre perceives the gap between producers and consumer, the breakdown of community designated by the very distinction between performer and audience, as a form of cinematic original sin.”<sup>45</sup> While classical era musicals (including the musical biopic) focused on bridging the gap between stage performances of early twentieth century forms, remediating Broadway or Vaudeville, the postclassical musical biopic continues this tradition in the context of the popular music industry. Thus, the contemporary musical biopic combines two forms— the film musical and (recorded) popular music— both of which are invested in their lack of liveness, that must be redressed by effects that simulate its effect or otherwise compensate for this lack. In *A Hard Day's Night*, the relationship between recording and liveness is not a structuring absence but a subject that the film openly and consistently addresses.

Rather than circumventing the technological embeddedness of contemporary popular music, *A Hard Day's Night* places recording technology and the television industry at the center of the film. The film's final act features a

live television show performance, and the lengthy preparations leading up to it. During this sequence, the film portrays performance as staged, mediated, and still fun. The band's 'live' performance is depicted with frequent shots from behind television cameras and monitors in addition to film-only shots of the band. Although, as the pompous TV producer / stage manager who clashes with the band insists, this is a 'serious' performance, The Beatles treat it as if it is merely another successful forum for spontaneity and play.

Citing *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), Corey Creekmur notes the typicality of such scenes in post-classical rock films. *Jailhouse Rock* "actually suggests that the technology / spaces of contemporary recording are both instrumental to the creation of rock and roll itself as a musical form."<sup>46</sup> Here, Elvis's character "never performs 'live' in the film but is always being recorded, on TV, on records, and in the movies."<sup>47</sup> The finale of *A Hard Day's Night*, and Creekmur's reading of *Jailhouse Rock*, stand at odds with some interpretations of the postclassical musical.

Rick Altman writes that "Once, it was the work of romance to disguise the financial side of music production; now that music's status as business venture has been unveiled, no traditional image can contain the malaise associated with such a sobering revelation."<sup>48</sup> *A Hard Day's Night* demonstrates that this shift towards portrayals of music in terms of business (as opposed to romance) can be achieved with lightness and artistry. Recording technology, mediated performances, and business discussions are all foregrounded, but so is The Beatles' ability to transcend their "sobering" confines. In effecting this delicate balance, *A Hard Day's Night* is both prescient (illustrating a contemporary mode

of the musical biopic that is sophisticated and commercially successful) and deeply invested in the history of the musical biopic to 1964.

*A Hard Day's Night* cites and critiques numerous clichéd plot points of the classical composer biopic. A central tendency of the biopic is to portray the central character's place in history (whether artistic or political) as deeply bound up in their personal psychology. Joshua Clover identifies the biopic's primary characteristic as "a conventional and banal understanding of psychological mechanism. The Oedipal study is the most common form, but a full taxonomy of the various options wouldn't carry one much past mid-semester in Psych 101."<sup>49</sup> Glenn D. Smith's recent work on the "celebrity biopic" also points to the placement of "psychological trauma" as the motivating "force behind the protagonists' decisions" as *the* primary characteristic of the genre.<sup>50</sup> *A Hard Day's Night* exposes the flimsiness of such characterizations.

In both short asides and longer narrative arcs, *The Beatles* film portrays simplified psychological causation as untenable and comedic. In a brief example, when a press conference interviewer asks Paul, "Do you often see your father?" he responds, "No, actually, we're just good friends," clearly referencing Oedipal entanglements with the stock response that celebrities use to deny rumors of affairs. The obviousness of the biopic's "psychological trauma" plot is treated most extensively with Ringo's supposed inferiority complex.

In the final act of the film, Ringo causes a miniature crisis when he disappears just before the band's performance on a television show. This is depicted with familiar technique for suspense: crosscutting between different scenes moving toward a shared deadline. Ringo has been encouraged by Paul's grandfather to consider, "Where would they [the band] be without the steady

support of your drum beat?" and goes incommunicado on a meandering walk while he contemplates his role in the band. It is with mock seriousness that we are supposed to consider the question that leads Ringo on his tame and shortly resolved bender.

The film's excessive emphasis on Ringo, clearly the least talented and significant member of the band, immediately registers as a joke. When the other Beatles explain Ringo's fussiness with his drumsticks, because they "loom large in his legend," this clearly parodies the somber mood of 'serious' musical biopics like *A Song to Remember*. Ringo is patently the least legendary of The Beatles; he is a competent musician, but also the bandmate whose primary contribution to the group's image was his ordinariness and aloofness, which effectively complemented the more ideal qualities of his bandmates. Where Paul, George, and John are a bit too confident, too cute, and too talented, Ringo, by contrast, is somewhat pathetic and only sheepishly adorable.

Consider the following exchange between Ringo and George Harrison.

While Ringo nervously toys with a cigarette lighter, his bandmate asks him:

George: What's the matter with you then?

Ringo: It's his grandfather. I can tell he doesn't like me. It's 'cause I'm little.

George: You've got an inferiority complex, you have.

Ringo: Yeah, I know, that's why I play the drums. It's me active compensatory factor.

(Ringo meekly retreats from an attractive female passenger who flirts with him)

George: You goin' in then?

Ringo: She'll only reject me in the end, and I'll be frustrated.

George: You may get lucky this time

Ringo: I know the psychological pattern. It plays havoc with me drum skins.

*A Hard Day's Night*, thus, effectively takes on the simplistic psychology that so defines the biopic— “the genre that assumes more than any other that history unfurls because of character formation and for no other reason.”<sup>51</sup> Here, Ringo— given intentionally overly articulate, explanatory dialogue— performs as both the subject and the therapist. Thus, *A Hard Day's Night* anticipates the critic and spectator's dismissal of psychological explanations. Ringo's “inferiority complex,” “psychological pattern,” and “active compensatory factor,” are all raised to be dismissed as insufficient to account for popular entertainment or artistic expression.

This device has relevance beyond the musical biopic or biopic. Numerous studies of Hollywood cinema have noted the dominance of character psychology as the primary narrative catalyst in Hollywood cinema.<sup>52</sup> As Joshua Clover notes, the biopic's excessive foregrounding of this device lays bare a narrative mechanism more subtly present in much Hollywood cinema. Clover writes,

It would be a commonplace to note that Hollywood is the cinema of bourgeois individualism, as a rule; the biopic is simply the ur-case of this, which perhaps begins to explain the contradictory place it holds in the cinematic consciousness: it exemplifies the world view cherished by Hollywood, but at the same time exposes how straitened that conception is.<sup>53</sup>

*A Hard Day's Night* effectively participates in this critical project— pointing to the insufficiency of psychological explanations when so many other factors are involved in the production of popular music. Yet, if *A Hard Day's Night* rejects psychological motivation as a credible explanation, what is left to explain the artistic process?

Rather than obscuring or effacing the fact that profit incentive is an essential precondition of popular music's existence, *A Hard Day's Night* makes

the production of numerous, consumable appearances of The Beatles a central fact of the film's diegesis.<sup>54</sup> Advertising, press appearances, and television appearances are relentlessly central parts of the story. While many musical biopics minimize the role that sound reproduction and technology (the means by which the band-as-mass-product is produced) plays in the creation of the band or performer as we know them, *A Hard Day's Night*, by contrast, often foregrounds mediation. The film takes us behind the scenes and presents as a given the extent to which technology inextricably defines our consumption of music. As Steve Jones writes,

it is the technology of popular music production, specifically the technology of sound recording, that organizes our experience of popular music. Without electronics, and without the accompanying technical supports and technical experimentation, there could not be the mass production of music, and therefore there would not be mass-mediated popular music, or its consumption.<sup>55</sup>

Instead of minimizing the role of technology in the production of popular music, *A Hard Day's Night* places television performances and press conferences at the center of its narrative.

Nonetheless, such reflexivity ultimately functions as a 'reality effect' because it exposes the fakery of the more conventional biopics—effectively saying 'you and I both know this is a mediation or construction, but in that acknowledgement, this is a truer representation than those that sidestep this confession'. This admission could conceivably deflate the significance or importance of The Beatles story. In effect, this is precisely the trade-off that the film wants—sacrificing education, stuffiness, or pomposity for fun and creativity. At one and the same time, then, *A Hard Day's Night* registers as both

more authentic and demystifying while also, through this very maneuver, achieving more spontaneity alongside more 'realism.'

As with *Jolson Sings Again*, such reflexive representation aims ultimately to reinstate that which has been lost in the era of mass reproducibility. Though *A Hard Day's Night* rigorously critiques itself as biography, the light way this is achieved functions ultimately to encourage the consumer to believe that—in spite of all the worldly, mediated, and business-oriented attempts to contain or package them—the spontaneity and creativity of The Beatles is such that they transcend all attempts to contain or commodify them. Only the much older and more tedious managers are concerned with the drudgeries of managing their career such as drawing up contracts, scheduling press conferences, and keeping them safe in crowds. For The Beatles, these are all simply forums for fun. The constancy of this playful reflexivity is such that it extends to the film medium as well. The use of non-continuity editing during "Love Me Do" and other song sequences—the very performances that are supposed to register as most truthful and authentic—forcefully calls attention to the constructed, plastic nature of the film medium. It is suggested repeatedly that the film medium cannot be trusted. What offsets this reflexive tendency is the clear representation of personality. The film's anchor is the consistency with which Paul, Ringo, John, and George are portrayed as fun, likeable, and talented. It is in this context that the emphasis on Ringo (in addition to its comedic effect) fulfills a straight function: privileging 'personality' as a commodity.

The fact that *A Hard Day's Night* refuses to frame The Beatles story beyond the context of the production and consumption of popular music importantly redresses the pretense of many classical musical biopics to aggrandize musicians



such as Chopin or Cohan as important political figures. In contrast to *A Song to Remember* and *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *A Hard Day's Night* briefly parodies the potential for this film to be political. In response to an elderly passenger's invocation of war and sacrifice, Paul sarcastically responds, "we got ourselves . . . workers' rights and all that." Later, Paul acts out a World War II submarine battle and goofily hums "Hail Britannia" while playing in a bubble bath. While one could criticize *A Hard Day's Night* for dismissing the political so simply, it also points to the transparency of such efforts in classical versions of the genre that impose a political-life-story onto one that, in actuality, was an aesthete's-life-story. These short scenes in *A Hard Day's Night* preposterously stage the unreflective way that the musical biopic combines the national and the political with popular entertainment or art. Deflating the pretensions of prior musical biopics constitutes a worthy and important corrective to classical era films in this genre. However, the film's insistence upon the entertainment world as the outermost reference point is also a troubling end-point.

*A Hard Day's Night* works to construct a universe wholly centered around The Beatles and their fans, encouraging entertainment consumption defined by disillusionment and disavowal: 'We know these performances to be fake, but wish to believe in them all the same.' The consumption of such openly commercial films is accounted for in Theodor Adorno's totalizing critique of the mass entertainment industry. In his view, the culture industry's increasing mediated, reproducible, and reflexive tendencies add up to a unified, flattened level of cultural experience that is inartistic and based solely on perpetuating more consumption of very similar products and experiences: "Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part."<sup>56</sup>

Crucial to this process is self-citation: “Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce.”<sup>57</sup> The current, continued importance of multimedia programming supports Adorno’s theorization of the mass culture industry. Many of his broad points have proven to be increasingly true of the film industry and its relationship to technology, media, and other popular forms.<sup>58</sup>

If Adorno’s theory is accurate in its broadest observations, his work is destined to miss many of the specifics. This is true at the level of economics and advertising. R. Serge Denisoff maintains that the musical and film industries remain more separate industries than the critical emphasis on “synergy” would have us believe. Where it is commonly supposed that the music and film industries share easily overlapping commercial interests, artists, record labels, and movie studios are often at odds with one another regarding ideal strategies of cross-promotion.<sup>59</sup> Adorno’s approach also tends to exclude close readings of individual texts in exchange for broader surveys. As Thomas Schatz has pointed out, broadly theoretical approaches often value speculative analyses of social significance at the expense of close attention to cultural texts.<sup>60</sup> Without bracketing out the fact that *A Hard Day’s Night* exhibits all the characteristics that worried Adorno, the film’s rich textual features also display an intelligent investment in the formal possibilities of music and film. The Beatles film, thus, like the best of Hollywood cinema, manages to reconcile an obvious and open investment in commercialism while also sophisticatedly working on and within the musical biopic genre.

Yvonne Tasker's work on the construction of popular music stars provides an analytical framework which can also be effectively applied to *A Hard Day's Night*. She situates the persona cultivated by the celebrity/popular artist as complex and contradictory while also keeping in clear focus that their ultimate function is always commercial. Taking the case of Dolly Parton, Tasker analyzes the rhetorical function effected by the singer's open acknowledgement and embrace of artificiality and performance:

Parton's directness about her artifice reinforces a sense that she is 'actually' like the persona she performs, whilst simultaneously ridiculing any such interpretation; it is, after all, only an act. There is no referent, outside of the world of the movies and entertainment, for her parodic authenticity, her performance of white (trash) womanhood.<sup>61</sup>

Similar to the way that the integrity of Parton's persona is maintained by this negotiated contradiction, *A Hard Day's Night* works by sustaining two messages about The Beatles: First, the band is not interested in 'revealing their true selves' or anything so serious and sanctimonious; rather, they are solely committed to fun. Second, since fun is presented as their most essential attribute, it is impossible to claim that the film is superficial or skirts a more serious angle on the group. Like Parton's star persona, The Beatles film tells us that the group is always only performing, creating a defensive and enclosed presentation of an essentially fun but also faked version of the self that is difficult to critique or reject.

Such relentless emphasis on "play" is, in fact, characteristic of many biopics. As George Custen notes, numerous entertainer biopics strive to present work as fun: "The romanticization of most professions also throws heroic light on the professions that compromise the motion picture business, sanitizing a

Darwinian view of the world by presenting it as a Disneyland. Work is transformed into play, and those who perform these transformations are rendered heroic.”<sup>62</sup> While the film’s emphasis on technology, industry, and mediation would seem to draw our attention to the constructedness of The Beatles’ phenomenon, the band’s refusal to ever treat or experience work as work fits this conservative function of the entertainer biopic— to convince us that all efforts connected to the entertainment industry are all fun after all.

The ability of the lead protagonists to transcend the world of the film via their entertaining performances is, of course, broadly characteristic of the musical genre as a whole. In his discussion of the displacement of the classical musical by the rock musical, James Collins describes the continued dominance of the convention in which the lead’s performances ‘musicalize’ the world: “The advent of the rock musical, which by its rhythms, characters and intended audience appears to mark definitively the end of the classical musical, has ironically signaled the return of many of its central features.”<sup>63</sup> Collins cites *Footloose* (1984) as fitting this pattern:

The struggle over the dance at the prom is set in traditional terms of spontaneity vs. stolidity, personal expression vs. public repression. Ren manages, like Astaire or Kelly before him, to transform a wide variety of natural spaces (barns, football fields, etc.) into dance spaces, thereby ‘musicalizing’ as much of the world as possible.<sup>64</sup>

*A Hard Day’s Night*, two decades earlier, works in much the same way— positioning young musicians against older, repressed professionals. In The Beatles film, the “musicalizing” of the world happens at the formal in addition to the social level. The Beatles’ sense of fun transcends every performance space, dreary way-station, and medium— including the very film itself, working to

convince us of the insuppressible authenticity of The Beatles as consummate entertainers. They are so entertaining, the film implies, that no medium can contain or constrain them. The film's presentation of The Beatles as too-big-for-their-own biopic qualifies *A Hard Day's Night* as an ideal film for the post-studio-era marketplace. As many critics have argued, the defining characteristic of the post-classical commercial film is its self-conscious placement within a multimedia industry, connectable to numerous other tie-ins and entertainment experiences.<sup>65</sup>

A brief review of the status of the film and entertainment industry in the 1950s and 1960s reveals how ideally suited *A Hard Day's Night* was to this era. Hollywood's period of crisis or "retrenchment" in the 1950s not only coincided with the ascendance of television,<sup>66</sup> but the emergence of the youth market,<sup>67</sup> the increasing popularity of rock music, and the development of the LP record.<sup>68</sup> While the film industry's stock had declined, all of the above constituted new, exceptionally profitable markets, which the film industry would slowly move to incorporate in the late 1950s and 60s.<sup>69</sup> *A Hard Day's Night* represents the most successful film of this era to capitalize doubly on the music and the film industry.<sup>70</sup> The film, which cost only half a million dollars, went on to earn over \$13.5 million.<sup>71</sup> It effectively set a new standard for cross-promotion— a possibility so unanticipated at the time that

EMI and Capitol, The Beatles' record distributors, neglected to include soundtrack rights in the original contract negotiated with Epstein. In an unprecedented twist, United Artists employed the film to sell records. This was a lesson that would not be lost in the future by record companies such as MCA, RSO, and others with film studio connections.<sup>72</sup>

As Denisoff and Romanowski, point out, given that The Beatles first

introduced [the youth market] to the viability and the economy of albums. . . . It is no surprise that The Beatles created the bridge that made the union between the movie and record industries possible. Up until that time, soundtracks usually consisted of an expanded theme song and instrumental fillers. *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* Changed that; both albums spawned multiple hit singles.<sup>73</sup>

While Denisoff and Romanowski's account appropriately emphasizes the film's commercial imperatives, other biopic studies have neglected to keep the profit motive in clear focus when considering the genre's primary goals. In *Bio/Pics*, George Custen is primarily concerned with the biopic's "ability to shape public history."<sup>74</sup> Privileging political or social investment as the primary project of the biographical film, Custen argues that the film industry has largely ceded this genre, and its attendant functions, to television. He writes that, "Well into the 1960s, when other genres had adjusted their stance to a new postwar social order, the biopic continued to articulate an ideology of fame that presented a vanished world of values."<sup>75</sup> By keeping the ultimately commercial goals of the biopic in clear focus, my primary criteria for analysis are different from Custen's. Where Custen writes that the biopic, in the postclassical era, began to seem, "quaint, madly heroic, and certainly out of step with today's tabloid ideology of fame," *A Hard Day's Night* represents a significantly different kind of biopic, which Custen does not account for: one invested not in 'shaping public history' but, simply, promoting entertainment.<sup>76</sup>

## CHAPTER II: BIOPICS AND BLACKNESS: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF APPROPRIATION AND REPRESENTATION

### ***Great Balls of Fire!* and the Two Modes of Black Performer Biopics**

*Great Balls of Fire!* (1989) begins, like so many musical biopics, with a sequence which introduces us to the eventual star in their childhood. Here, a tracking shot follows a pair of young white boys rushing across a small town at night. As they cross the proverbial tracks to the wrong side of town, one boy warns the other that they are entering the black section of the city. The child charging headlong into the “chocolate quarter,” is, of course, Jerry Lee Lewis. When the boys arrive at a juke joint and peer through an open window, Jerry Lee’s wary cousin, Jimmy, worries at hearing “the devil’s music.” Jerry gleefully responds “Yeah!” while basking in the visceral and sonic thrill of the bluesmen playing and the sexualized club dancing. As Jerry Lee develops into a recording superstar, he blends black and white musical styles, attracting a fervent following among white youths and some protest from their elders.

By the time Jim McBride’s biopic reached audiences in the late eighties, the representation of a white character exploring black social spaces and cultural forms was no longer controversial. *Great Balls of Fire!* makes Jerry Lee an easy hero for his willingness to stand up to the backwards townsfolk—the segregationist, rock-is-the-devil’s-music crowd—who no longer exist. In this way, the film typifies the self-congratulatory tendency of Hollywood to represent social problems after their controversy has passed, and in a manner that flatters the audience with common sense clichés of the present day, like prejudice is bad,

don't judge someone by the color of their skin, or, in this case, African Americans make well-crafted, danceable music that is entertaining.<sup>1</sup>

That said, *Great Balls of Fire!*—in spite of some hooray-for-today lessons—does represent the history of multi-racial musical exchange that is, to a great extent, *the* story of American popular music. While Lewis's relationship with black culture is born of a musical attraction, this interest is also presented in more ambivalent terms, appealing to his crass commercialism. At one point, he touts the ability of his "white right hand and black left hand" to "make money." In the art and entertainment industries, to steal another artist's work without credit or payment should be understood as a serious violation. Here, the practice of appropriation is narrativized, thereby throwing a more critical, confessional cast on a routine practice so entrenched in the history of popular music. Appropriation is emphasized more often in narrative feature films than in other extensions of the music industry. How often do musical artists make this process an explicit part of their musical oeuvre, stage, or public performances?

In this chapter, I will explore the cultural politics of the musical biopic's persistent attraction to African American entertainers. Where less than two per cent of biographical films in the classical era (from the 1930s to the 1960s) featured black subjects, this number has increased to more than twenty per cent in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> The recent spate of minority-centered biopics presents an ideal cultural sphere in which to explore the vexing history of white musicians appropriating the styles of black artists. Two kinds of musical biopics lend themselves to an analysis of this practice: films which tell the life-story of a black entertainer (such as *Leadbelly* and *Lady Sings the Blues*) and films in which a white star is inspired by, or appropriates without acknowledgement, black



musicians and musical styles. In films like *Elvis* (2005) and *Great Balls of Fire!*, while the screen time which the lead spends observing black music is, in fact, only a matter of minutes, the deeply formative quality of this impression exceeds its fleeting on-screen portrayal.

A thematically grouped set of essays in Steve Cohan's 2002 anthology on the classical Hollywood musical illustrates—even though this is not their explicit topic—differences between racial representation in musicals of classical versus post-classical Hollywood. The four essays grouped under “Racial Displacements” cover two distinctly different modes of racialized representation in the classical era. Where Michael Rogin and Shari Roberts cover the use of blackface and the star persona of Carmen Miranda—grossly overdrawn, stereotyped performances—essays on *Footlight Parade* by Linda Mizejewski and *Singin' in the Rain* by Carol Clover, by contrast, draw out fleeting references or appearances of racial difference which, but for a few seconds, are otherwise absent from canonical classical musicals.

The representativeness of these expertly chosen essays shows that Cohan did not overlook any dominant treatment of minorities in the classical musical. These split approaches—which address either gross caricatures or fleeting moments—aptly characterize the nature of racial representation in classical Hollywood musicals. Cohan writes that, but for the occasional overdrawn ensemble character (such as Miranda), the representation of racial minorities constitutes

a cultural blindspot of the Hollywood musical, overall, namely, the relative absence of non-white entertainers in proportion to their contributions to and influence on the entertainment industries. . . This absence structures how musicals represent the

genealogy of American entertainment. Taken as a whole, this genre recounts a history of twentieth-century popular music—set in eras of vaudeville, supper club and nightclub revues, the Ziegfeld Follies, Broadway, and the movies—which is noticeably white, even when the music refers to sources in ragtime, jazz, or the blues.<sup>3</sup>

George Custen's work on the biographical film tells a similar story about the under-representation of minorities in this genre during the classical era. In his study of American biographical films from 1927 to 1960, he reports that "There were only twelve films (4%) made about nonwhite North Americans [just five depicted African Americans]. Only two professions, athlete and professional entertainer, are associated with black Americans, representing in a simplistic way many people's perceptions of the limited careers open to blacks."<sup>4</sup> In terms of the musical biopic, African Americans are nominally present in nightclub scenes or musical medleys where they are afforded a single song or performance solo. (See, for instance, Lena Horne in *Till the Clouds Roll By* [1946] or Louis Armstrong in *The Five Pennies* [1959])

In the post-classical era, the casts of musical biopics are more racially diverse: minorities appear more frequently in leading and supporting roles; popular music is more often credited to the innovations of black artists; films which star a white musician frequently include a scene where the lead is instructed or, at least, inspired by minority musicians. Carolyn Anderson reports a similar increase in minority presence in the biopic genre: where less than five per cent of biographical films featured black subjects in the classical era, this number has increased to more than twenty per cent in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1960s, the musical biopic has shifted from a genre that was almost exclusively white, to one whose most expensive, mainstream iterations repeatedly portray

the lives of African American musicians. This shift in emphasis requires an attendant recalibration of critical approaches to address this new era of racial representation. Where the modes of racial depiction covered in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader* are either openly derogatory or scantily visible, now African American singers are often the subject of nearly-hagiographic biopic treatments. What critical approaches can we take, then, to this more vague, middling territory of racial representation, where black musicians are so frequently featured, and given a complexity of characterization accorded only to whites in the classical era? Though we have exchanged effacement for visibility and stereotypical caricatures for more carefully drawn characters, my survey of race in the contemporary biopic, like Cohan's selection of essays under "Racial Displacements," is also bifurcated but whereas the essays in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader* treat either thorough or negligible portrayals of race, I cover both modes of representation. In this case, my analysis is divided between films which tell the life stories of African-American musicians, and those in which they appear only as mentors or inspirational figures for popular white artists. While, broadly speaking, the inclusive, multiculturalist bent of these musicals clearly differentiates them from those of the classical era, the two kinds of films I address are divided along similar lines—between features which (by dint of featuring a black artist) explicitly work with race as a dominant, structuring interest that informs the entire film, and those in which the white star is only inspired or tutored by a black musician.

## The Emergence of the Black Performer Biopic

While the inclusion of African American music as an influence or inspiration for white artists has long been a secondary theme or plot point in musical biopics—see, for instance, *Swanee River* (1939)<sup>6</sup> and *The Jolson Story* (1946)—the turn to represent the stories of African American entertainers—with the sole exception of the W.C. Handy biopic *St. Louis Blues* (1958)—didn't begin until the 1970s, with the Billie Holiday biopic *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972).<sup>7</sup> Despite the novelty of this film, it was only a middling success and few biopics (*Leadbelly* [1976] is an exception) about black entertainers were made before the early nineties, when it became a much more popular topic. Films produced in this period include *The Josephine Baker Story* (1990) (TV), *The Jacksons: An American Dream* (1992) (TV), the Tina Turner biopic *What's Love Got to Do With It* (1993), *Why Do Fools Fall in Love* (1998) about doo-wop singer Frankie Lymon, *Hendrix* (2000) (TV), *Little Richard* (2000) (TV), *Ray* (2004), *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2005), *Dreamgirls* (2006), *Cadillac Records* (2008), and *Notorious* (2008). Biopics about James Brown, Charley Pride, and Miles Davis are all currently in development.<sup>8</sup> Although the musical biopic was a well established genre by the 1930s and 40s—with a broad range of films focusing on classical, Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and jazz composers or performers (and two black athlete biopics were made in the early 50s, *The Jackie Robinson Story* [1950] and *The Joe Louis Story* [1953])—Hollywood did not produce a musical biopic about an African American entertainer until Paramount released *St. Louis Blues* in 1958.

### *St. Louis Blues*

*St. Louis Blues* stars Nat King Cole as the composer and cornetist W.C. Handy. The film also features an all-black cast at a time when blackness was

largely invisible in most Hollywood features, and, most important of all, it ascribes ownership of this musical form to an African-American entertainer.<sup>9</sup> Though the film was a landmark, critics at the time of the film's release were quick to note the many compromises and shortcomings of *St. Louis Blues* as biography and music history: "The life, times, and music of the late W.C. Handy, from age 10 to 40, are dealt with carefully, respectfully, and more slowly than is good for the project," wrote critic William R. Weaver in *Motion Picture Daily*, adding that, "The filming is done with a care bordering on reverence."<sup>10</sup> *Variety* described *St. Louis Blues* as

such a genteel portrayal of life in Memphis in the early years of this century that you might wonder why the Negroes ever sang the blues. The blues certainly came in part out of the spirituals that expressed the deep and justified melancholy of the Negro. They came from laborers' folk songs, but they also came from the honky-tonks, the bordellos and the bistros, and this is barely indicated.<sup>11</sup>

More recent film studies texts are equally unenthusiastic, or, at most, ambivalent. Both John C. Tibbetts and Krin Gabbard, authors of the most extensive studies of the musical biopic to date, point out how *St. Louis Blues* strategically avoids any critical engagement with race. Tibbetts writes,

Handy's racial identity has been mostly erased . . . That Handy is an African American living and working in a black community in the racist, segregationist South is scarcely apparent. There is nary a hint of bigotry and oppression—a striking departure from the oppressive social milieu and numerous racist incidents described in Handy's autobiography.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the erasure of racial prejudice, Gabbard discusses the necessity of casting the mild crooner, Nat King Cole, in the lead role. He writes, "Cole functioned as a healthy alternative to the unsavory image of the drug-crazed,

psyched-up black jazz artist that had been thoroughly inscribed on the American mind by the late 1950s.”<sup>13</sup> Gabbard also notes the central role that the white establishment—and the prevailing institution of highbrow music, the classical orchestra—plays in validating Handy’s music. Tibbetts seconds Gabbard’s observation, noting how the final scene of the film, in which a blues song is performed by a classical orchestra, resembles the treatment of African American musical traditions in previous films about white composers, such as MGM’s 1947 Jerome Kern biopic: “Cole’s stiffly formal and sacralized concert rendition of ‘St. Louis Blues’ is not altogether dissimilar from Sinatra’s ‘whitened’ rendition of ‘Old Man River’ in the climactic scene in *Till the Clouds Roll By*.”<sup>14</sup> In *St. Louis Blues*, Cole’s friend and nightclub singer Gogo (Eartha Kitt) convinces his father to attend the final performance of Handy’s compositions on the grounds of its highbrow, classical status: “This is Aeolian Hall, Reverend. No dancing, no drinking. People pay \$3.30 a seat just to sit and listen to great music.” As such, the narrative of *St. Louis Blues*, in fact, closely resembles that of earlier Tin Pan Alley biopics such as *Swanee River*, in which a white composer appropriates black folk music. Gabbard writes,

After apparently absorbing the laborers’ songs through listening, the Handy of *St. Louis Blues* plays along with them . . . . The film is unremarkable in suggesting that Handy is better off following his own instincts and that he transforms simple folk music into something much more sophisticated. As the privileged spectator and auditor of black music, Handy/Cole was granted the kind of subjectivity usually extended only to whites.<sup>15</sup>

As the first of its kind, *St. Louis Blues* does the culturally important work of narrating the life of an accomplished African American composer and performer. Still, this landmark was realized at the expense of numerous

compromises. Recalling the Oedipal conflict of *The Jazz Singer*, Handy's life-long estrangement from his reverend-father is not resolved until the final act, in which the lead's work is situated in a more conservative context—the synagogue in *The Jazz Singer*, and the symphony hall in the 1958 film.

Consider how well Robert L. Carringer's summary of *The Jazz Singer* also describes *St. Louis Blues*: "The story is transformed from a fable of adjustment (how the new generation finds its place in a cultural tradition) to a more characteristically American fable of success—open revolt against tradition, westward movement, the expenditure of energy, triumph, and the replacement of the values of the old by the values of the new."<sup>16</sup> As in *The Jazz Singer*, where Jackie's rabbi-father opposes the prodigy's interest in popular music, W.C.'s father, the Rev. Charles Handy (Juano Hernandez) provides almost *every* opposition to his fulfillment, as a musician and a respected son.<sup>17</sup> It is the father who destroys his first cornet under the hooves of a carriage horse and, until the film's final scene, dismisses his son's inventive orchestrations as so much "devil's music." That institutional racism provides no obstacle whatsoever to Cole's progress is, of course, a glaring blindspot. *St. Louis*'s evasive approach to race is matched by a calculatedly meek performance by the African American star.

While Porter's mild performance in *St. Louis Blues* disappointed contemporary critics, it was, apparently, well in line with his established work in television. Despite his Poitier-like persona, Gabbard notes that Nat King Cole's television performances were treated with anxiety equal to Elvis:

More often than not [on his television show], Cole was photographed from the waist up in much the same way that Elvis Presley's lower body was concealed when he appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. . . Although, in a sense, Cole was the inverse of

Presley—a restrained black man acting ‘white’ rather than a shameless white man acting ‘black’—NBC felt a need to conceal his hips in the same way that CBS attempted to censor Presley.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, where Gabbard describes NBC’s framing of their minority star in terms of the network’s aim to maximize his potential appeal without offending any viewers’ propriety, contemporary responses to *St. Louis Blues* suggest that the mildness of Cole’s performance could not carry a feature-length film. Reviewers were not just unoffended, they were simply bored. Reviews at the time of the film’s release were negative, noting the meekness of the lead performance: “The film was a disappointment at the box office. Critics particularly singled out Cole’s performance as ‘thin and anemic and much too suave and courteous, Cole seemed out of place and it was apparent that he lacked the strength and range to carry the picture.’”<sup>19</sup> Provided this context of Cole’s television career, we can conclude that Paramount likely expected a similarly compromising, non-threatening performance, in line with Cole’s established persona and the management of black musical bodies on television. Despite or, perhaps, because of these compromising qualities, the film was not a commercial success. The box office failure of *St. Louis Blues*, despite a cast of musical talents (including Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, and Mahalia Jackson in addition to Kitt and Cole) with mainstream appeal and a narrative that portrays classical orchestration as the ultimate validation of the blues, goes a long way in explaining the 14-year gap between this film and the next black artist biopic.

### *Lady Sings the Blues*

The Billie Holiday biopic *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972) was conceived and produced by Motown Records owner Berry Gordy, who also wanted to use the



film to promote his contract-artist Diana Ross. As a dual-investment, Gordy's film also promoted Ross as a solo artist following the breakup of The Supremes. Like *St. Louis Blues*, the film was a financially risky venture. When *Lady* ran over budget, Gordy was castigated by Paramount executives, who pointed out that its projected expense of \$2 million dollars was already four times the figure they had previously granted a black feature.<sup>20</sup> Gordy was forced to assume all the additional costs of the film to prevent a forced production wrap and quick edit to salvage a production that was perceived to be out of control. Gordy's risky decision to take on the financial responsibility for this picture turned out to be a good one, as *Lady Sings the Blues* earned \$19.7 million at the box office, and was nominated for five Academy Awards.<sup>21</sup>

*Lady Sings the Blues* deserves a measure of credit for making racism a much more visible subject than any of its precursors, such as *St. Louis Blues*. Unlike the '58 film, in which the social importance of race is evaded, *Lady Sings the Blues* makes racism a much more visible subject. The years between this film and the first about a black male artist had seen African Americans become both more powerful and more present in cinematic performances, partially due to Hollywood's identification of the black urban market as a significant source of revenue. The two most significant developments regarding African Americans and cinema in these intervening years help to explain the doublesidedness of *Lady Sings the Blues*. The civil Sidney Poitier had emerged as the biggest African American star in the history of Hollywood, with leading roles in numerous successful films, including *The Defiant Ones* (1958), and two 1967 best picture nominations for *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *In the Heat of the Night*. Also in the early 1970s, the *blaxploitation* film cycle emerged, partly in opposition to the

civility of the Poitier performances. The shocking success of Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), which earned \$20 million on \$50,000, was the first of this series of films, featuring clear opposition between black heroes and white villains.<sup>22</sup> The most important film to mention in this context is the Pam Grier film *Black Mama, White Mama* (1972), which makes light, campy fun of Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* (1958). Both films feature the same plot and characters: a van of prisoners crash, and the escapees we follow are a black and white prisoner shackled to one another; but where, typical to his body of work, Kramer pairs Poitier and Tony Curtis in a straight-laced, social problem film, *Black Mama, White Mama*, made in the middle of the blaxploitation cycle, is, unequivocally, geared to make a quick buck out of an entertaining story. It is little surprise to see the Stanley Kramer film, which targeted the "good-liberal consensus" audience, reworked to include more exploitable elements, namely nudity and violence, that appeal to the movie audience in terms of sensationalism, not morality or political interest.<sup>23</sup> The comparison of these two films reveals the tendency of racial representations to exaggerate. Next to films featuring white protagonists, which more often situate their leads as averagely human[, befitting the complexity of the individual,] these central black characters stand out as either too-good or too-bad.

By the early 70s, popular cinema was at a tipping-point, torn between two ways of representing black life on screen; one built around the idealized star image of Poitier, whose erudition and restraint made him equally appealing and off-putting for audience identification—a characterization resonant with Cole's mildness in *St. Louis Blues*—and the other, featuring more rebellious, forceful

characters such as Shaft and Sweetback, but ones that were borderline caricatures of African Americans as over-sexed, over-emotional, and violent.

These changes in black film culture and production are reflected in *Lady Sings the Blues*, a film which seeks to combine the contradictory elements of prior black cinema. Here, African American characters fall in between such starkly divided performances of assimilation or resistance. Black men are sometimes portrayed as oversexed and predatory, but other times as handsome, worthy companions. Holiday's extraordinary musical talents are, of course, made clear, but she is also portrayed as hapless and indecisive. The film's clearest fictionalization expresses these contrasts. While Holiday had a series of variously unreliable companions, the film invents a long-time idealized love interest with Billy Dee Williams as Louis McKay. It hardly seems excusable to create a "dream prince charming" to compliment Holiday's equally consistent helplessness and dysfunction, but, as Donald Bogle argues, the depiction of such a lavish, glamorous courtship, however sexist, remained a landmark in its own right: "It was a new sensation to watch a black man actually court and cajole a black woman. Rarely before had the movies given audiences the idea that black characters could be romantic."<sup>24</sup> Yet, alongside such gloss and glamour, *Lady Sings the Blues* also attempts to treat the harsh realities of racism, and its terrible effect on Holiday's life. *Lady Sings the Blues* portrays the damaging presence of racism and segregation in both spaces occupied by entertainment stars, like radio studios, and the places of everyday life, such as restaurants, hotels, and public streets. A summary of selected scenes from the film illustrates the film's portrayal of racism in these various contexts.

Early in the film, Holiday, performing at an African American night club, is approached by members of a traveling white jazz band interested in hiring her to perform with them. Holiday is shocked, not that these white men believe she is talented enough to play with them, but that their collaboration could be socially acceptable. She asks, "a colored singer with a white band?" The pairing, though, turns out to be successful, and Holiday is soon accepted as one of the boys.

Holiday, of course, is successful fronting this band and her manager, Reg, seeks out other avenues for profit. He lines up a radio advertisement for Holiday, but Sun Ray soap, at the last minute, opts to use a lesser-known white performer. Though Holiday is, by this point, an emerging star, this status is not enough to compete with the racist prejudices of the advertising industry. Holiday angrily dismisses the advertiser, saying, "They're trying to sell soap, right? Everyone knows we don't use it. Heh. Give a bright complexion, pretty white hands." This scene clearly portrays the privileging of whiteness in the advertising industry. As seen here, *Lady Sings the Blues* persistently foregrounds race and racism. Holiday's life-story is positioned as a window into a more broad representation of race-based discrimination and oppression in mid-century America. This focus intensifies as Holiday and her band tour the South.

When the group travels south, she accepts, as necessity, the inconvenience of segregation, waiting by the bus while the band gets to comfortably dine inside a restaurant. When Holiday encounters more virulent, direct expressions of Southern hatred, this is more than she can stand. Two incidents lead Holiday to a nervous breakdown. Shortly after she unexpectedly encounters a lynched black man near a bus stop, her band travels past a Ku Klux Klan rally. Holiday

can no longer repress her emotions, and tries to scream at the Klansmen while her bandmates restrain her. Gary Storhoff argues that *Lady's* portrayal of racism—present though it is—has been insidiously transformed so as to comfortably locate such pernicious social attitudes only in the past and the South. His reading centers on this encounter with the Klan rally: “Her hysterical response to the Klan is immediate, localized to southern racism, and intensely personal. . . the film, emphasizing racism as a peculiarly southern problem, located in the long ago (the 1930s) and the far away, is clearly intended to absolve guilt and reassure the Silent Majority's anxieties.”<sup>25</sup> Comments from the film's own production staff validate Storhoff's thesis that *Lady* is best read as “a crossover text, created to win the sympathies of both a white and an African American audience. In its effort to provide for all possible viewer positions, *Lady* negotiates racial, gender, generational, and political issues.”<sup>26</sup> In the featurette included with the release of *Lady Sings the Blues* on DVD (2005), co-screenwriter Suzanne de Passe, in a comment which could also characterize Gordy's lifelong approach to musical production, qualifies that “we [the production staff] always made the distinction that this was a film that happened to have black people in it, but it wasn't a black film in that only black people would watch it.”<sup>27</sup> While Storhoff is accurate to diagnose a conciliatory approach to racism, *Lady* nevertheless deserves a measure of credit for being the first musical biopic to tell the story of a black musician without discounting the importance of race and racial discrimination in the subject's life.

Initially, in fact, Storhoff promises a more evenhanded reading of the film, which emphasizes the film's availability to audience segments progressive, conservative, or apolitical:

In its effort to provide for all possible viewer positions-- from the Silent Majority conservative of the early 1970s, to the African American proud of the real-life Holiday's achievements, to the viewer primarily interested in Diana Ross's career-- *Lady Sings the Blues* negotiates racial, gender, generational, and political problems with complexity and subtlety.<sup>28</sup>

By the conclusion of the article, however, Storhoff shifts to a more familiar academic account of Hollywood filmmaking-- that its social and cultural portrayals are ultimately more conservative than progressive. Storhoff points to a long list of Holiday's character traits in describing the film's sexist and conservative tendencies: Holiday has multiple hysterical episodes, she has drug problems, and needs a stable male-partner for everyday support.<sup>29</sup> While Storhoff's argument works, it does so without identifying any of these character traits as broadly typical of musical biopic protagonists. As Carolyn Anderson, Jonathan Lupo, and Glenn D. Smith Jr. have studied, the male leads of post-classical era biopics are also portrayed as unstable, drug-addicted, and in need of the moderating influence of a more functional partner.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, in his eagerness to outline a typical conservative viewer, Storhoff creates a straw spectator who is nearly unimaginable:

The film thus frames its retrogressive argument: If only Billie had known her place--as loyal wife and obedient daughter, if only Billie had restrained her hubristic desire for fame and wealth in favor of home and family, if only Billie had understood the tacit boundaries for African American women that the Silent Majority takes for granted, then Billie would have been safe, innocent, and happy.<sup>31</sup>

While aspects of Holiday's characterization, such as her hysteria and codependence, do contribute to a sexist framework for understanding this life-story, Storhoff's "if only" spectator who wishes, in effect, that Holiday was never

famous or talented is scarcely coherent and, thus, overstates the dominance of a conservative framework for understanding this depiction. *Lady Sings the Blues* is a step forward in the representation of African American performers on screen, but one taken with the idea of attracting as broad a mass audience as possible. Storhoff's reading overemphasizes the conservatism of this approach, without granting *Lady Sings the Blues* its deservedly landmark status or acknowledging that it successfully attracted liberal audiences as well.

Unlike *St. Louis Blues*, which did not elicit interest from contemporary reviewers proportionate to the novelty of its subject, the significance of *Lady Sings the Blues* was not lost on cultural critics of the early 70s. Review essays by Pauline Kael and James Baldwin represent very different readings of the film. While both critics point out historical inaccuracies, where Kael finds the film a generic work that "delivers" and "works far better than it did on white singers' lives," Baldwin condemns it as a relatively sanitized portrayal of poverty and white racism as compared to the depth of these influences on Holiday's life.<sup>32</sup> He writes that the film shows, "nothing, in fact, of the kind of terror with which this girl lived almost from the time that she was born."<sup>33</sup> The most accurate assessment of *Lady Sings the Blues* lies somewhere between Baldwin and Kael's polemical responses. Contra Baldwin, the film undeniably foregrounds the determining and oppressive influence of race in Holiday's life via numerous scenes that are not mentioned in his article. Contra Kael, we ought not be as cavalier in relishing the biopic's celebration of "personality" at the expense of the historical and social. Gordy's film represents a step forward in the evolution of the African American performer biopic, but only a step, and one taken at the expense of a regressive portrayal of its female lead, whose character and life-

story is structured around the invention of a husband/savior to offset Holiday's frequent missteps.

### ***Leadbelly: A Defiant Version of a Mainstream Form***

Reviewing the cycle of black entertainer biopics to this point, if *St. Louis Blues* is disappointing in its conciliatory, non-threatening portrayal of W.C. Handy, and *Lady Sings the Blues* makes a greater effort to show the evils of racism, but at the expense of the lead's agency, *Leadbelly* (1976), far more confrontational and pessimistic in tone, represents a significant departure from the first biopics about black musicians. This film, which tells the story of the rough-and-tumble folk singer Huddie Ledbetter during the early twentieth century, was also the first effort of Gordon Parks Sr. (who was best known for directing *Shaft* [1971]) to move beyond the blaxploitation genre. Here, the lead singer is portrayed as far more defiant and independent of the white establishment than in *Lady Sings the Blues*. Whereas in the Billie Holiday film, the significant white characters—her bandmates and manager—all have Holiday's best interests in mind, the majority of *Leadbelly*'s white associates do not; their interactions are characterized by antagonism and exploitation or, at best, a detached interest in archivization. Far from appeasing and catering to white spectators, *Leadbelly* presents a persistently hostile, mutually antagonistic relationship between *Leadbelly* and his white patrons. Aside from scenes which bookend the film, in which Alan Lomax records Ledbetter's life-story and songs, his white audience positively relishes his enforced servitude as an entertainer. In one instance of such treatment, following the humiliation of performing in front of a Union Jack at a Southern dance hall, the men who hired him to play demand



that he entertain the audience past midnight, violating their contract. The ensuing fight lands Leadbelly in jail. Later, as a convict, he is forced to play a set of songs for the governor in a scenic arrangement that resembles a slave performing for his owners at a plantation home. Ledbetter is summoned to perform before the governor, who condescendingly cannot remember Ledbetter's name after he is told it repeatedly. Instead, he commands him to perform, "Hey *you*, sing me a song now, you hear?" and after liking the song, comments "Ain't no one can sing like a darkie when he puts his mind to it!" When the performance concludes, the governor says, "Now you know, Will, I could give you a pardon, but then I wouldn't have you to sing for me next time I'm down here." As spectators, we witness this scene, not only from Leadbelly's perspective, but from the point-of-view of the other African American men who continue to toil in the field. A man on the chain gang mocks Huddie's apparent subservience: "look at him playin' darkie for those white folks."

The consumption of Leadbelly's performances by others—especially those of different races and social classes—is portrayed in a more ambivalent light in the scenes which bookend the film, where the Lomax brothers record his stories and songs. In the promotional material that Paramount compiled for the film's release, the Lomax brothers receive the most lengthy and laudatory thanks of anyone: "The producers wish to acknowledge the pioneer work of John and Alan Lomax in discovering Leadbelly and recording and publishing his music in the 1930s in 'Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly.' Alan Lomax's biography in that volume provided invaluable material for the making of this film."<sup>34</sup> Yet, in the film itself, the interactions between Leadbelly and the Lomaxes are more ambivalently portrayed. Ledbetter is genuinely surprised to hear that his music

is to be archived at the Library of Congress, wishing, instead, that his songs simply be “free, like butterflies:” “You got my whole damn life there. My Momma, my Poppa, and everything that ain’t gone yet —’cept me singing about them. You ain’t gon stick some pins in my songs.” Where the Lomax project is treated with some skepticism in *Leadbelly*, this framing device is recycled in *Cadillac Records*, but (as I will cover later) its characterization in the 2008 film is emphatically positive.

Parks complained that Paramount did not adequately support the film upon release. In the only recent article on the film, L. Roi Boyd III reports that Parks, in a discussion with the *Village Voice*, described *Leadbelly* as “neither blaxploitation nor Robert Redford, and Paramount doesn’t know what to do with it,” and that, receiving so little support from the studio, *Leadbelly* might never have been released but for the efforts of *Time Magazine* film critic Charles Champlin, who “encouraged Parks to enter it into the Dallas Film Festival, where it won first prize. By then, Paramount had to release it, but did so only through a tour of dilapidated theaters in low-income areas.”<sup>35</sup> Boyd III continues,

Paramount Pictures pitched *Leadbelly* as a ‘blaxploitation’ film and featured it in an ad emphasizing the basic elements of the blaxploitation formula: sex and violence. Furious with how the film was promoted, Parks fought the studio and a new ad was finally created, emphasizing the tenacity of the man who, despite trial, tribulation, and terrible injustices, was not only able to compose fine music, but also influenced what would eventually become the American institution of rock and roll. The new ad read: ‘His songs —from Rock Island Line to Goodnight, Irene —influenced McCartney and Dylan. He is a legend called Leadbelly.’<sup>36</sup>

The film itself remains more conflicted than Parks would have interviewers

believe. Whereas Huddie Ledbetter was not a physically imposing man, Roger E. Mosley, with practically comic book-quality muscles, is cast in the lead role. It is true that the film's promotional poster exaggerates the physique of Mosley, but this is, in fact, a logical extension of advertising. The poster (shown in Figure 1 below) hypes an already present element of the film.

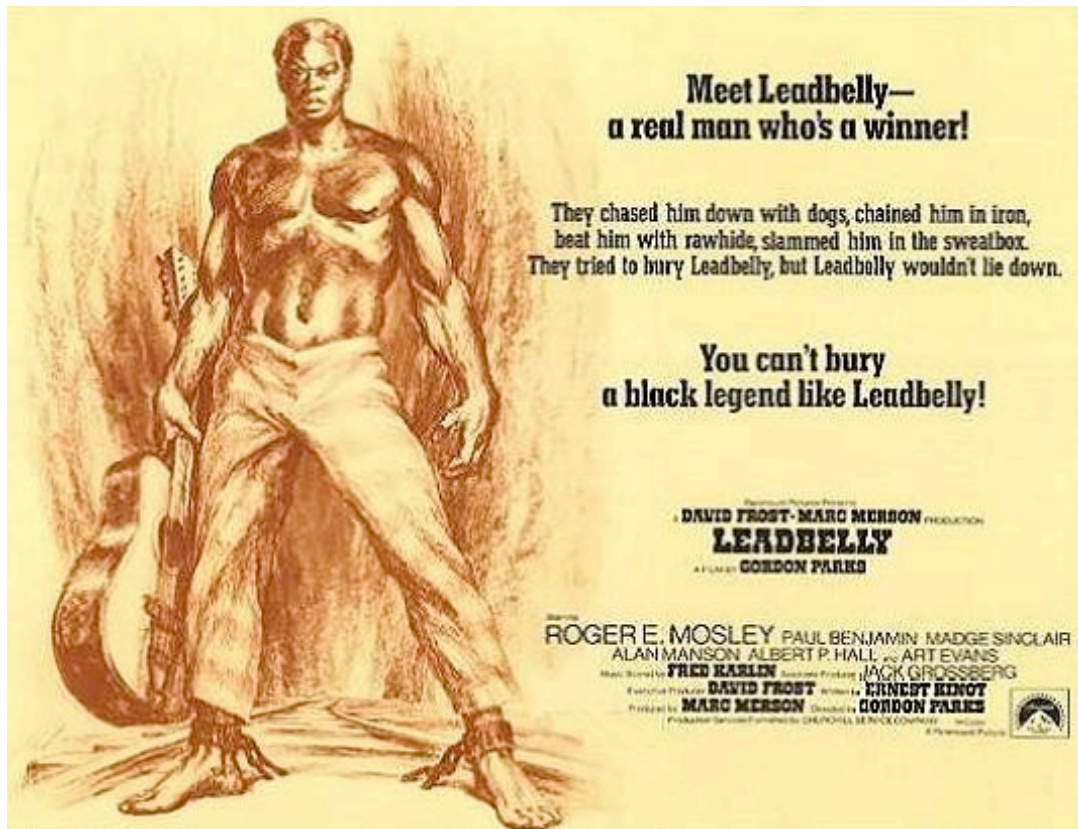


Figure 1. *Leadbelly* poster

A review in *New West*, which reported that recently, “Mosley gave a good comic performance as a foxy health spa attendant in *Stay Hungry*,” provides relevant information about the lead’s recent acting career.<sup>37</sup> Vincent Canby also commented on the peculiar casting choice: “Mr. Mosely is a big, heavily muscled actor, but the muscles look more as if they came from lifting barbells in some neatly tended gym than from the random heaving of bales of cotton.”<sup>38</sup> Although Parks (in interviews about the film) repeatedly pitches the film as a highbrow portrait of an artist, this casting choice (in addition to the film’s persistent racial antagonism) clearly places the film within the history of blaxploitation. Indeed, the basic plot structure of *Leadbelly*, which alternates between dynamic confrontations between our black hero versus the white establishment and long passages with the lead in hiding or on the run, just as aptly describes *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*.

The racial conflict that characterizes almost every minute of *Leadbelly* is both the film’s most original quality but it also, undoubtedly, limited its mainstream appeal. Racial tensions persist even in the relatively mellow Lomax sessions that end the film, in which Lomax’s assistant remains visibly frightened of Leadbelly. Previous biopics in this nascent subgenre simply ignored racism (*St. Louis Blues*), or carefully historicized and regionalized its existence (*Lady Sings the Blues*); discrimination is entrenched and unavoidable in *Leadbelly*. The only means of subsistence for the film’s African American characters are to live, to the extent this is possible, in separate societies, or to constantly decide how to manage their encounters with white antagonists, forever moving between confrontation and appeasement.

*Leadbelly*’s pessimism likely limited its chances for mainstream success

more than its emphasis on racial conflict. Thus, in terms of its ability to succeed as a “crossover film,” it matters less that, when his chain gang supervisor threatens Leadbelly with a shotgun, he only has a hoe, or that another inmate tells Leadbelly that “when they are trying to kill you, just living is winning,” but that these obstacles cannot be fully overcome. By the film’s conclusion, Leadbelly, following his session with Lomax, “resolves, when paroled in six months, to be his own man and sing his songs across America.”<sup>39</sup> The viewer, even with the knowledge of Leadbelly’s inevitable success, doubts the efficacy of this peaceable decision. Given the parade of disappointments and roadblocks to Leadbelly’s success, we are left with a less certain or triumphant picture of his inevitable fame. We are denied the triumphant montage of success that is de rigueur in most musical biopics and that, by extension, celebrates the myths of individual mobility, meritocracy, and steady social progress. This mode of film biography is a far cry from the classical era films which usually depicted lives whose perfection provoked a sense of envy and distance in the average viewer. According to Custen, the classical biopic “helped prepare average people to accept their place in the social structure by valorizing a common, distant, and elevated set of lives that readers could hope to emulate”<sup>40</sup> *Leadbelly’s* restricted portrayal of success, so at odds with the generic tendency of the biopic, more than its emphasis on racism, likely limited its appeal.

Even though *Lady Sings the Blues* performed modestly well, *Leadbelly’s* failure at the box office goes a long way in explaining how, just as suddenly as a cycle of black music biopics appeared to gain traction towards a more sizable trend, production of these films dropped off dramatically. After one middling result and one failure Paramount, which had distributed both *Leadbelly* and *Lady*

*Sings the Blues*, likely concluded that the black music biopic was not a profitable subgenre. From this point, from the mid-70s to 1990, not a single theatrical release featured the life-story of an African American popular performer. Musical films shifted to the portrayal of white performers (often in made for TV films) in features such as *Bound For Glory* (1976), *The Buddy Holly Story* (1978), *Elvis* (1979) and *Birth of The Beatles* (1979), female performers [*The Rose* (1979), *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), *Sweet Dreams* (1985)], and (most popular of all during this era), the exploitation of popular musical groups in films such as *Flame* (1975), featuring the fleetingly popular glam rock band Slade, *ABBA: The Movie* (1977), and the Bee Gees playing The Beatles in *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1978). Black performers appear in jazz films, namely Clint Eastwood's portrait of Charlie Parker, *Bird* (1988), and 'Round Midnight (1986), loosely based on the life of another tenor saxophone legend, Lester Young, but never in films which feature more popular music. This changes, again, in the 90s and 2000s, but, in the interim, black musicians return to a function common to musical biopics of the classical era—as inspiring musical figures for white players to study and imitate.

Neil Diamond's 1980 remake of *The Jazz Singer* is an appropriate film to begin this section. Coming after the black music biopics of the mid-70s, and after the brief but intense cycle of the blaxploitation genre had come and gone, this film's conservatism signals a shift back to the marginalization of black performers. This adaptation restages the story of a Jewish American who wishes to make it as a popular singer, but is also pained to disappoint his Orthodox parents. This most recent *Jazz Singer* still features a blackface scene in which Diamond is forced to step-in for an absent member of the African American

foursome for whom he writes music. The black club goers who apparently wished for a more racially homogenous experience (and have no knowledge that Diamond is ghostwriting for the group) are outraged less that Diamond has blacked up, and more that, simply, they have not been listening to an all-black group. "That ain't no a brother; that's a white boy!" the audience member who sparks the riot shouts. While Gabbard argues that this *Jazz Singer* "upholds Hollywood's old racial hierarchies by suggesting that a group of black singers is dependent on a white man for their music" I would add that it also portrays the African American consumer as the demographic group preventing the production of openly mixed-race musical performances or recordings.<sup>41</sup> The camaraderie between Diamond and his black bandmates, who cooperate to safely escape the club's mini-revolt, is far more characteristic of black roles in Hollywood through the rest of the 1980s than the defiant (*Leadbelly*) or oppressed (*Lady Sings*) protagonists we saw in the two African American musical biopics of the 1970s. As scholars such as Ed Guerrero have argued, a new round of popular films in the 1980s such as *48 Hours* (1982) and *Lethal Weapon* (1987) starring a white/black duo, in which the black man characteristically sacrifices himself so that the white lead may survive, was so common as to warrant a generic designation, the biracial buddy film.<sup>42</sup> This character configuration can, in fact, be traced back through numerous classical era films (musical biopics included) where a black/white friendship more commonly took the form of a multi-generational mentorship than friendship, but the principal of the black character sacrificing himself for the white lead applies similarly in both eras.

### ***Your Cheatin' Heart and the Black Buddy/Mentor***

In a subgenre of these films that I study, where a white musician works (with the help of an 'authentic' mentor) in a traditionally 'black' vernacular, a third kind of stock character is often present. This character objects to the white protagonists' interest in black music, in terms that are unequivocally objectionable. With *Crossroads* (1986), in which Ralph Macchio plays a teenage guitar prodigy, Eugene, obsessed with the blues, this function is fulfilled by his instructor from Julliard. We certainly cannot agree with Dr. Santis, the snooty professor who scolds the young musical prodigy, fluent in both blues and classical styles, for pursuing them both. Santis informs Eugene that he cannot play the blues because he is not black: "don't serve two masters . . . Excellence in primitive musical is cultural. You have to be born to it . . . I suggest you reexamine your priorities." In the 1950 jazz film, *Young Man With a Horn*, a young white trumpet talent, Rick Martin (Kirk Douglas) loosely modeled on Bix Beiderbecke, is greatly aided by an African American jazz man, Art Hazard (Juano Hernandez). Rick's controlling psychologist/wife plays the role of the racist objector. Lauren Bacall's Amy, upon meeting Rick for the first time, dismisses jazz as "a sort of cheap, mass-produced narcotic" even though she "know[s] it's supposed to be our native art. Cotton fields, the levees, New Orleans and blues in the night." Just previously she also inquired if he thought the form was "purely African?" These objections to white study of traditionally black music forms are so gross, they work rhetorically to reinforce the lead subject's right to pursue this interest. If the spectator had any qualms about their appropriation to this point, the straw people of *Young Man With a Horn* and *Crossroads*, Amy and Dr. Santis, do not offer a logical way out of Rick and



Eugene's ideologically troublesome pursuits; far from it, their objections position the lead's passion for black music as socially progressive.

Gabbard studies *Young Man With a Horn* as an exemplary film in the tradition of films which posit a black-to-white "musical parentage" of jazz. While Gabbard does not analyze this scene with Amy, it effectively compliments his study. Amy's statement about jazz is so obviously ill-conceived that its weak logic underscores the validity of Rick's investment in jazz, authorizing his interest in the form. Yet, as the film progresses, it is not Amy's objection that is *devalued* most (according to Gabbard), but Hazard's tutelage. As Rick develops into a great musical talent, he also marries badly, becomes alcoholic, and mistreats the now-elderly Hazard. Rick fails to recognize his cruel treatment of Hazard until it is too late. Gabbard summarizes the last act of the film, which finalizes "the ideological project of devaluing the black figures in [Martin's and, by extension,] Beiderbecke's musical parentage."<sup>43</sup> Once Martin is so successful he no longer needs his one-time-mentor and "Hazard takes on a feminized, mother-hen function that black companions have fulfilled for white heroes in American popular entertainment at least since Huck Finn," "gently chiding [Rick] about his increasingly self-destructive behavior but receiving no [reward] for his efforts."<sup>44</sup>

While Gabbard effectively surveys the generic tendencies of the jazz biopic, he also dismisses the possibility that musical biopics in more popular genres, such as pop, rock, or country, may share many textual features with the jazz film. He makes this argument with the claim that the dominant forms of instrumental music, jazz and classical, have come to occupy a separate musical sphere, and offer significantly different kinds of experiences than rock and popular music:

Consumers of rock and pop, who are more overtly involved with the erotics of music, have made the music video industry essential to their experience of music. If these two groups represent opposite poles along the continuum of how music can be experienced, then jazz today surely has more to do with classical music.<sup>45</sup>

While this claim makes a case I agree with for studying rock and pop apart from jazz and classical music, the generic specificity of certain musical genres does not preclude the possibility that more contemporary musical biopic films may have as much or more to do with each other than the musical style with which they work. The following scene, in a country biopic, has much to do with Gabbard's analysis of *Young Man With a Horn*.

The beginning of *Your Cheatin' Heart* (1964) presents a condensed version of the sacrificial black mentor story. The film opens mid-song as the young Hank Williams (Donald Losby), sings a carefree tune, "Poppin' that Shine," accompanied by an African American guitar picker Teetot (Rex Ingram), while shining the shoes of a customer on a dusty street corner. This unlikely duo has an easy friendship and seem content to eke out their paltry income from busking and shoe shining. Middle-aged Teetot compliments Hank's progress and fluency in singing and tells him that one day he will inherit his guitar. This moment comes sooner than either of them expect; Teetot, with only Hank at his side, suffers a sudden attack, asks Hank to "take me home" by singing a few verses of "Jesus Loves Me," and dies in a matter of seconds. In a telling detail which foreshadows Hank's similar demise, Teetot had just taken a swig of liquor before his collapse.

In this opening scene, the film establishes the fluid improvisational talents of Hank as well as the fact that this aptitude was best coaxed along and

cultivated with the help of an African American man. Hank's great skill, we infer, is shaped by careful study and imitation of Teetot, who, in turn, recognizes and fosters this ability. The legacy that Teetot leaves him, though, is double-edged; while the tutelage of this black vagabond gives Williams an authentic musical heritage—a connection with real America, not formal, soulless training—it is also an inheritance that must, finally, be disavowed and forgotten. Teetot, after all, dies anonymous and poor. He had no great ambitions for his music other than its ability to wile away time and slightly boost shoe shine tips. While the natural, amateur quality of this music and its integration with daily life lends folk or country music much of its cache, this early history must ultimately be transcended if Hanks wishes to be a professional success. As I will detail in the following pages, the legacy of Teetot's tutelage is not a mere subtext that I am drawing out, but an explicit, dominant point of dispute between Hank, his wife, and his bandmates. The singer's low-class roots, discussed frankly in reference to his relationship to Teetot, remain a point of influence and contention between him and his handlers as the film progresses. Hank's lack of education and refinement, always paired with his relationship with Teetot, is portrayed as a concern from the beginning of the film.

In the opening scene, just after Teetot and Hank have successfully entertained and serviced a customer, an innocent conversation about their musical training turns nasty after the customer mocks and corrects Hank's unrefined manner of speech. When their customer asks the "youngin" if he plays too, Hank replies "Teetot's learnin' me." The customer retorts: "Teachin' boy, not learnin'. You could use some learnin.'" Camera placement and blocking associate the young singer with his African American counterpart. Teetot and

Hank are positioned as equally powerless, dwarfed in high-angle, low-angle reverse shots, by the obese and condescending patron. (Similar camera placement will be used in *Leadbelly*, where work supervisors on horseback and the governor's mansion porch party are blocked above the lead character) Hank, startled by the customer's rudeness, rares back to throw his shoe brush at him, but Teetot intervenes, counseling Hank to accept his meager lot in life: "Don't pay him no mind Hank. What do you say now, think we got enough to call it quits?" Teetot declares the "twenty-five cents" that Hank reports to be plenty. Though Teetot dies just seconds later, the legacy of his influence informs the rest of the film. Hank's short time with Teetot fits a tendency of the biographical film to "telegraph" the psychological formation of its lead subjects via a few short, but crucially significant scenes. According to Custen's research, many biopic leads in the studio era were developed according to the narrative principle that "the forces that drove the person to achieve his or her unusual destiny" could be concisely and dynamically explained with just one or two key formative scenes.<sup>46</sup> For the future musical stars of many a popular musical biopic, such as Hank Williams here and Jerry Lee Lewis in the opening of *Great Balls of Fire*, the initial encounter with black music figures as just such a scene.

For the remainder of *Your Cheatin' Heart*, Teetot's legacy survives as a point of pride for Hank and a source of concern for his wife, Audrey (Susan Oliver). Audrey, who, upon first sighting Hank declares, "That kind of man can't be civilized, he's got to be tamed," attempts this unsuccessful project through the remainder of the film, as Hank lurches between success and failure, hedonism and obligation. Audrey opposes the attributes that we understand Hank to have fostered with Teetot, his un-acquisitive contentedness or, to put it

more bluntly, his laziness and lack of ambition.

Teetot's lasting influence on Hank is discussed most explicitly when, during some downtime at a hotel, Hank holds up his mentor's guitar, and reminisces over his inheritance:

Hank: You know who this belonged to?

Audrey: Hank, you must have told me 'bout Teetot a hundred times. He is long gone, honey.

Hank: I'm supposed to forget, huh?

Audrey: I mean, yes, in a way you gotta forget him. Unless you do, you'll always be what you were, and what you still are.

Hank: Woman, ain't you ever gonna quit tryin' to change me?

Audrey: I saw it in their faces again today. Hank, you have a way of reachin' 'em... If you can ever get it through that thick head of yours, that you can go right on to the top.

Hank: The top? One night here and the next night there, thinkin' up new arrangements, rehearsin'. I joined up for a try but I didn't think it would be this complicated.

Audrey: He'd rather be peddlin' medicine.

Female band member: Or leanin' up against some lamp-post.

Hank: What's so wrong about that? It's nice and easy. Here comes the morning sun, and there she goes down.

Audrey: I bet that's the way a dog sees life.

Male band member: Between somebody throwin' him a bone.

Hank: What's wrong with all of you? Night and day chasin' the almighty buck. Ain't you never gonna be satisfied?

Here, Audrey and the rest of the band are startlingly frank in their assessment of Hank's inheritance from Teetot. The weaknesses, according to this criticism, that Hank continues to indulge-- laziness, contentment, and resignation-- are all stereotypes of African Americans. The fact that Hank is likened to a dog satisfied by a meager bone stands out as the most egregious racialized comparison, clearly recalling Teetot's easy-going acceptance of so little. Their judgments become more complicated, though, when Audrey adds, "you gotta

forget him. Unless you do, you'll always be what you were, and what you still are."

According to the racialized rhetoric of Audrey's criticism, Hank's black father-figure, combined with his low-class, rural heritage provide a nearly ethnic identity/world-view that must be corrected if Hank is to be a first rate musician and success.<sup>47</sup> That Audrey allowed the weak and dark sides of Hank's character to be associated with this invented African American character is even more disappointing given that the real Audrey was greatly involved in the shaping of this character: she "was credited as an advisor to the film; hence, her role in the early development of his career was inflated while their divorce was omitted, as was Williams's marriage to his second wife."<sup>48</sup>

These points of contention continue through the film as, in the eyes of his associates, Hank repeatedly sabotages their best efforts toward his success. Audrey incredulously asks him "Whoever put it in your mind that it's a sin to be rich and famous?" We, who have seen the opening of the film, know that Teetot's character constitutes the strongest lasting influence on Hank; from him, Hank learned that one could happily call it a day after earning 25 cents, that worldly conflict is to be avoided, and that music should be enjoyable as an end in itself, with little expectation of profit or reward.

When Hank goes on a bender, nearly missing his debut at the Grand Ole Opry, it can scarcely be considered a coincidence that Audrey finds him jamming with black jazz musicians. After Audrey chastises him for nearly missing the biggest curtain call of his career, he shoots back, "Woman, who are you to tell me who I am? These are my friends, my kind of people. And I'll damn well sing to who I want, where I want, and when..." Without saying that he means African

Americans by “my kind of people,” this is clearly implied by the fact that the most visible member of the improvising musicians is a black saxophonist. Hank has, again, lived by Teetot’s values, prioritizing the sensual immediacy of musical expression over profitability and obligation. Jane Feuer’s explanation of the musical’s use of jazz as folk music clarifies what, at first, might seem an unusual pairing. She writes, “[F]or the purpose of the musical film, jazz possessed two traits show music did not possess to the same degree: an ethnic folk origin, and a high degree of improvisation. That is, jazz may be identified as a folk music and as a spontaneous music.”<sup>49</sup> In line with the musical’s tendency to position jazz in this way, the jam session opposes Hank’s potential (more scripted and commercialized) Opry performance as more natural and expressive.

Teetot and Audrey’s conflicting values sustain *Your Cheatin Heart’s* central, dramatic conflict for the bulk of the film, holding their opposing character traits in the kind of balance necessary for plot progression and conflict. Their worldviews appear equally legitimate, with benefits and costs illustrated by the good and bad decisions made by Audrey and Hank. Often, Hank’s refusal to prioritize profit compares favorably to Audrey’s shallow acquisitiveness. Hank’s demise, of course, resolves this conflict with finality. Audrey, the only survivor, was right; Hank and Teetot’s way of life is not sustainable. We must identify alcoholism, above all else, as their most important shared trait. The easy manner of Teetot and Hank’s relationship—they appear to share all their profits equally, and talk openly, as friends—could also lead us to believe that Hank acquired his taste for drink partially from Teetot as well. Unable to heed *Your Cheatin’ Heart’s* prologue as a cautionary tale, Hank is doomed to the same fate as his poor-mentor: to be destroyed by drink.

Hank and Teetot's intertwined legacies are ambivalently dramatized in the film's final scene. As Hank sabotages yet another gig, boozing and socializing with a working-class crowd at a local bar, he sees a mirage of Teetot in the store window. As an elderly African American man peeks in to catch a glimpse of (what we understand to be) Hank's final performance, an image of Teetot is superimposed over this man's body. Hank smiles while singing the otherwise sorrowful tune, "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." What has this image authorized?

Teetot is certainly an iteration of the sacrificial black buddy that numerous critics have noted in films which pre- and post-date *Your Cheatin' Heart*.<sup>50</sup> Whereas the black buddy is often able to intervene and save the white hero, here, by contrast, Teetot defines a doomed legacy for Hank to repeat.<sup>51</sup> While some worldly values that both men oppose can, plausibly, be discussed as admirable (their lack of acquisitiveness, in particular), this is, above all else, a tragic story; the spectator must lament the untimely demise of the singer, and his inability to reform. Hank's welcoming, contented acceptance of his doomed fate in the final sequence seems to glamorize the self-destructive pop star, but just following this scene, we quickly return to the professionally managed performance hall where Hank was to perform: there, a somber, almost all-white crowd, sings "I Saw the Light" together as a tribute to the singer. It is impossible to imagine the spectator who wouldn't have wished for a bit more professionalism on Hank's part. As Hank's story is finalized as a cautionary tale, the spectator is compelled to regret that Hank had not heeded Audrey's warnings. Ultimately, we must wish that her influence had been stronger and that Hank could, indeed, have disavowed his indebtedness to Teetot.



The weight given to Teetot's framing of *Your Cheatin' Heart* exemplifies a longstanding tendency of Hollywood films to exploit "the surplus symbolic value of blacks," making "African Americans stand for something besides themselves."<sup>52</sup> In *The Jazz Singer*, for example, Jolson's blackface characters persistently allude to "the peaceful, rural past."<sup>53</sup> In this case, Teetot's legacy lends additional credibility and authenticity to Williams's claim to ordinary America. *Your Cheatin' Heart's* use of the black mentor character or buddy intersects with the particularity of the country music film, where the lead character—whether biographically based or entirely fictional—struggles with their status as rural and under-educated. (*Coal Miner's Daughter*, which I discuss in the following chapter, provides another instance of such a country music biopic) In *Your Cheatin' Heart*, Hank is frequently marked as lower class. When Hank, early in the film, decides to ditch his career as a traveling snake oil salesman for singing, his employer yells after him, "You'll never be anything but trash!"

In *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, Richard A. Peterson remarks that the music producing establishment was slow to understand or embrace the popularity of country music in the early-to-mid twentieth century, in part, because of its antithetical values to, as Hank says in *Your Cheatin' Heart*, "some slick haired fancy Dan from New York City:" "It was country to their city; the unchanged to their rapidly changing; traditionalism to their modernism; craft-made to their mass-produced; and aesthetically rear-guard to their avant-garde. The music's maker was the country bumpkin, rube, linthead, cracker, or hillican to their up-to-date city sophisticate."<sup>54</sup> The halting attempts of the lower-class and rural white musician to gain acceptance by more urbane business

associates and audiences is frequently narrated in country music films.<sup>55</sup> If we accept Gabbard's observation that musical biopics punish their African American subjects at a greater rate than whites—"For African American jazz musicians [in *Bird*, *Lady Sings*, and *'Round Midnight*] the only success is the kind that leads to self-annihilation. For white artists the conditions for success are much less dire"—then *Your Cheatin' Heart* represents something of an exception to this tendency.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, Hank's relationship with Teetot, along with his rural heritage, enhances the authenticity of Hank's story and provides a rationale for his self-destruction.

It is much more typical for films in this genre to represent this process of black-to-white musical inspiration as far less destructive for the white beneficiaries of repurposed styles of black music or tutelage. In the film with which I opened this chapter, *Great Balls of Fire!*, the talented protagonist is able—in a way that is controversial strictly in the time period of the diegesis, not at the point of the film's release—to successfully exploit his hybridized style. The use of the familiar opposition between the sacred and the profane (also seen in *St. Louis Blues*) provides the (rather obvious) conflict in the film, effectively overwriting any concern the audience may have with the racial politics of Lewis's appropriation of black musical styles. By *Variety's* count, six made-for-TV Elvis films were produced from 1979-2005. The most recent of these, is an ABC special starring Jonathan Rhys Meyers. This made-for-TV-film, *Elvis* (2005), provides an additional example of this prototypical narrative. Like *Great Balls of Fire*, this film sustains the contradictory claims that Elvis is both a wholly individual artist and that his success is largely dependent on his co-optation of black musical forms. In the same conversation, for instance, a producer tells the

emerging star that “I knew if I found a white man who could sing it [race music], I’d make a million dollars,” and also, “You stay true to yourself, you’ll be okay.” While we see the formative years which shaped Elvis’s musical interests, in which the singer-to-be sneaks out of his staid white church to hear the more inspiring gospel music of black churches, this influence is negated by his later insistence on complete individuality. He promotes himself with the claim that “I don’t sound like nobody.” When Elvis’s mother must defend her son’s unusual passion to his more traditional father, it is in terms of his inimitable uniqueness, that “Elvis has his own style.” The narrative tendency of the musical biopic to shortly depict, then drown out—in choruses of claims about unparalleled individuality—the process of cultural cooptation is well established.

The tendency of contemporary films to briefly cite the black foundation of these musical styles only to discount its importance next to the genius and artistry of the white entertainer is hardly a characteristic unique to the contemporary musical biopic. As Gabbard and Carol Clover outline in critical studies of classical Hollywood jazz biopics and musicals, respectively, this process of citation-then-suppression was well established in the studio era. In “Dancin’ in the Rain,” Clover examines two brief instances (not even scenes, but short moments within them) where black entertainers are referenced in *Singin’ in the Rain*. It is ironic, in a film which makes authorial attribution the moral of the story (as a singer that merely dubbed for another [Debbie Reynolds’ Kathy for Jean Hagen’s Lina] is eventually given top-billing) that the centrality of African Americans in the history of popular dance is *almost* entirely absent.<sup>57</sup> Clover briefly reviews the history of these contributions before reading two short moments in the film: a one-word allusion to Jolson—Cosmo’s utterance of

“Mammy!”—and a short glimpse of a production set, featuring blackface “cannibals in tribal regalia,” produced down-set from *The Dueling Cavalier*. The author describes these moments as instances of Freudian negation, “whereby the effort to ‘forget’ necessarily calls up the very ‘memories’ it means to put down.”<sup>58</sup> Clover moves from a discussion of the brief appearances of blackness to a more general account of *Singin’ in the Rain’s* cultural thievery, arguing that the dance styles central to the classical musical were drawn, in large part, from the uncredited innovations of black entertainers.

In contrast with the Hollywood musical’s erasure of the black foundations of white dance the musical biopic (the jazz biopic, in particular) has long been more open and explicit in its acknowledgement of the black forerunners whose musical styles inspired variations or imitations by eventual white musical stars.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, as we will see with *The Jolson Story* (1946)—though blacks are clearly more present *and* more artistically talented than in *Singin’ in the Rain*, this does not necessarily lead to more progressive or accurate portrayals of the racial politics of popular music. At a turning point in this film, based on the life of the popular blackface singer, the lead has grown tired of performing the same staid vaudeville routines and pitches a new idea to his producer. Strolling by the docks, Jolson witnesses some amateur African American musicians performing jazz. He excitedly relays this experience to his producer: “I heard some music tonight, something they call jazz. Some fellows just make it up as they go along. They pick it up out of the air.” The producer, of course, does not go for the idea. Thus, the film positions its audience to side with Jolson’s prescient appreciation of jazz over vaudeville standards. As Gabbard points out, we are “invited to appreciate Jolson’s foresight in predicting the popularity of jazz, or at least its

appropriation by whites. But the film also suggests that this ethereal music—picked out of the air by simple black folk—needs the genius of someone like Jolson to give it solidity and validity.”<sup>60</sup> While *The Jolson Story* does give black originators considerably more credit in the creation of the musical tradition that Jolson joins, this comes with the backhanded suggestion that jazz *needed* a figure of greater discipline and seriousness, in short, a white man, in order to give the form a lasting presence.

The black performer—whether he is just briefly heard on a stroll through the city (as in *Swanee River* and *The Jolson Story*) or a best-friend (as in *Your Cheatin’ Heart* or *Young Man With a Horn*)—who inspires or tutors the white male lead toward his more successful career figures as a stock character in the musical biopic. This is, in fact, such a common feature of the genre that the recent send-up, *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (2007) parodies this convention. In this scene, after watching an African American bluesman perform for seconds, the childhood Dewey spontaneously plays guitar and sings as if he too were a seasoned blues veteran. While *Walk Hard* lampoons other generic tendencies (such as compacted narration and childhood virtuosity) the musical biopic’s superficial and perfunctory portrayals of cooptation (of black musical styles and musicians) is tackled more than any other characteristic. It is highlighted repeatedly as a noteworthy, troublesome cultural practice.

*Walk Hard* continues to target the unreflective ease with which many musical biopics have portrayed the cooptation of black music in the archetypal scene in which the lead makes his debut. As with the childhood blues lesson, the white star’s imitation of African American styles in the star’s adulthood is also parodied. Recalling the scene from Neil Diamond’s *The Jazz Singer* in which Jess

Robin fills in for the frontman of an all-black group, Dewey (unlike Jess, he is not the group's songwriter, but the club janitor), successfully fills in for the lead, launching his career from this performance. As with the episode from his youth, Dewey's unexpected debut also parodies the condensed narration of the musical biopic. In this case, Dewey's enthusiasm for the blues and performance is shortly introduced in a scene which opens with a prototypical black juke joint. This space resembles an exaggerated version of the club which so inspired the young Jerry Lee Lewis in *Great Balls of Fire*. In a key two shot sequence, Dewey mimics the lead singer, substituting a mop for a mic-stand, lip-synching word-for-word and imitating his physical performance. Shortly after, the lead which Dewey so lovingly imitated sustains a sudden injury which makes him unable to perform. Dewey persuades the manager to let him fill in for the night. In the ensuing performance, characteristic of much contemporary comedy, stereotypes are so exaggerated as to be unmistakable as satire.

Before playing his first tune, Dewey brazenly imitates the stage banter of the African American lead. In a speaking style which clearly mimics a black manner of speech, John C. Reilly delivers what is understood to be the usual frontman's introduction to the song—the title makes the scene's engagement with racial appropriation even more explicit—“(Mama) You Got To Love Your Negro Man.” The club's patrons are, understandably, befuddled by this performance, and by the exactness with which this white man imitates songs whose style and content would seem to make them exclusively available to black performers. Nevertheless, their initial doubt is shortly overcome by Dewey's musicality and their need to dance. Spectators, in a matter of seconds, move from doubt and indignation to eager acceptance.

These scenes aptly characterize the recent increase in the visibility of appropriation and exploitation in popular culture. The exploitation of black recording artists has long been covered in academic journal articles and, to a lesser extent, the popular press. As seen in *The Jolson Story* and *Singin' in the Rain*, while Hollywood's depiction of the appropriation of black performance styles has traditionally been swift or scarce, this cultural problem has been addressed much more candidly and openly in popular music and film in the last twenty years. Some landmarks in this recent history include Bob Dylan's titling his 2001 blues album "Love and Theft," Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000), "Chappelle's Show" (2003-2005), and a 2002 rap song by Eminem which surprisingly broadcasts: "I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley, to do black music so selfishly and use it to get myself wealthy."<sup>61</sup>

But, to what end is the openness with which this subject is now so routinely treated? We would do well to remind ourselves, as Gabbard illustrates with *The Jolson Story* and Storhoff with *Lady Sings the Blues*, that the musical biopic is particularly adept at illustrating commonplace truisms from the present day in these historical films—dressing up what is really a mainstream, consensus-seeking argument as if it were more edgy and progressive.<sup>62</sup>

### ***Cadillac Records: An Ambivalent 'Bizpic'***

An ideal text with which to explore the politics of this sort of representation is the recent Chess Records biopic, *Cadillac Records*. As Joshua Clover points out, this film represents a different kind of biopic: "The film is more the biography of a business than a person. (Don't we need a subgenre for this—the *bizpic*, maybe?)."<sup>63</sup> By foregrounding the history of the record *label*—the

*production* of these songs, and the management and relative compensation of a line-up of black talent—it would seem that the bizpic must, effectively, be a more truthful mode of biography than the individualistic, star-celebrating form that biopics more commonly assume. True to this description, *Cadillac Records* makes the exploitation of Chess Records recording artists—centrally, Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, Etta James, and Little Walter—a central part of its narrative. Discrimination figures in numerous scenes: Etta, the child of a brief bi-racial affair, is unable to get her white father to take any interest in her, and Little Walter is roughed up by the police for doing little else but driving an expensive car. The scene with which I begin my analysis of *Cadillac Records* explores the topic that motivates this chapter: the appropriation of black musical styles by white artists.

Chuck Berry, played by rap artist Mos Def, is positioned by the film as the first practitioner of rock'n'roll, hybridizing two racially divided popular music genres, blues and country. In the scene that introduces Berry, he is blocked from performing at a club because he did not fit the racial profile the staff expected. When Berry and his band arrive to play a contracted gig, the club management, having assumed that the booked “country singer” was white, is incredulous. Though Berry is turned away from performing this gig, his records continue to receive more radio play and the popularity of rock'n'roll grows. His concerts being to draw increasingly large audiences. At a particularly raucous, large concert, barriers separating the young white and black crowds from one another are perfunctorily pushed aside, and both audiences happily dance together to Berry's music. The police at the function allow this, but draw the line when white teenage girls climb on-stage and dance along with Berry. Racial tensions



continue to plague Berry as his fame increases. The singer exploits the enthusiasm of his young fans, relishing his ability to attract the same sort of young white girls who danced on stage with him for sexual liaisons. We, of course, expect Berry to receive his come-uppance for pursuing these women, and he does. Yet, rather than depicting his dispute with the police in an isolated scene, *Cadillac Records* dynamically pairs Berry's arrest with his discovery that white pop artists are imitating and profiting from the very style of rock'n'roll that he devised. This sequence begins with Berry in a carload of nearly naked girls. Their encounter is interrupted when the singer suddenly hears a pop song whose instrumental track duplicates his "Maybelline" on the car stereo. To this point—taken resistance from two-dimensional promoters or policemen aside—Berry's music and ascendant stardom had enabled him considerable freedom in transcending racial boundaries. The singer's escapades with young women, which the narrator playfully refers to as his "recruitment of new talent," had been portrayed more with bemusement (at the 50's backwardness) than seriousness (regarding its potential consequences). Yet, it is the moment at which Berry, in the car full of white girls, hears The Beach Boys "Surfin' USA," that marks a shift in the film. Berry's music, which enabled him considerable mobility and freedom until now, will from this point forward be managed and performed by white entertainers. After the elliptical edit that follows this scene, Berry is arrested for taking these juveniles across state lines.

When Berry becomes distracted upon hearing the instrumental tracks of "Maybelline" on the car stereo, his companions are baffled by his response. When Berry angrily says "That's my song!," one of the girls, at once naïve and knowing, replies, "No that's not darlin', that's The Beach Boys." These straw

girls do not recognize the significance of Berry's decision to take them out of state *or* of the Beach Boys' unauthorized appropriation. Berry, by contrast, is immediately incensed by the musical thievery, but seemingly unaware of any problems his sexual forays may cause him.

The film asks viewers to compare the severity of these crimes by depicting his arrest in the following scene: Berry barges into the recording studio filled with righteous indignation. In this relatively safe space, he delivers an angry monologue: "That is 'Sweet Sixteen', note for note . . . not one change. Aside, apart from the lyrics, about the new lyrics about . . . surfing. I've provided them the soundtrack unbeknownst to myself." The engineer asks him if he's ready to lay down some new tracks, to which he sarcastically responds, "I'm ready. I'm very ready to make more songs for the Beach Boys and all other manner of white folks to steal. Yes, I'm quite ready. [Len walks in] You say the devil's name, he appears. You heard this? You know what's going on? I'm not laying down for this. First, Freed gets a third for 'Maybelline', for what?... Did he write one part of the song?" But Chess has come with more pressing news. After curtly responding to Berry's agitation with the Beach Boys—"Freed put us on the map"—Chess warns Berry that the police are about to arrest him for transporting a (white) minor across state lines. If the film has not already made these points of contrast explicit enough—as this short sequence pairs the car scene and the studio scene, asking us to consider which is ultimately the larger crime—Berry argues with the police as they cuff him and escort him from the room: "Jerry Lee Lewis has a thirteen year old wife, are we stopping by his house on the way over there? Emmet Till gets murdered for whistling at a white woman. I know you're pleased to get Chuck Berry." A montage sequence, featuring Beach Boys songs

and clips from “beach movies” follows Berry’s arrest.<sup>64</sup> In a particularly deliberate juxtaposition of images, Berry’s arrest photos are paired with footage of elated, white beach-goers from these films. Note how the following frame (Figure 2) clearly suggests that Berry, who has been effectively removed from the public eye and the realm of performance, has been relegated to the secret, or suppressed center of the surfin' safari.



Figure 2. *Cadillac Records*: Chuck Berry beach movie collage

By both aligning the spectator with Berry—who links one scene to the next and speaks most eloquently on the subject—and closing with this three-part image, the following reading is made clear: In the 1950s, mixed race affairs were

regarded as criminal, but now we can see that the Beach Boys unauthorized use of Berry's music is the far greater crime.

*Cadillac Records* clearly and obviously draws attention to the phenomena of musical appropriation and inadequate compensation, yet it is hard to know what to make of this contradictory film that, at the same time as it condemns the exploitation of these black artists is also deeply nostalgic. If the sequence centering on the appropriation of Chuck Berry's music works, unequivocally, in exposé-mode, the opening credit sequence illustrates the tendency of the film to treat its historical period in a more romantic, nostalgic manner. Here, a sleek, faux-retro montage introduces the key semantic elements of the film. As we see film stock flicker and hear the pop of analogue records, shots of archival materials, photographs, concert tickets, gold records, guitars, record players, and, of course, Cadillacs. They are all lovingly introduced in a syrupy voiceover over by Willie Dixon (Cedric the Entertainer):

I'm making this here recording so when you visit Chess Records studio you know the history. Now, the first time a gal took off her underwear and threw them on stage it was on account of the blues. Now when the white girls started doing it, they called that rock'n'roll. Took a whole lot of people to make the music that changed the world.<sup>65</sup>

The effect of this curious combination is difficult to judge or situate with finality. How can we make sense of the film's double-sided quality—its equal presentation of alternately dystopic and utopic moments of the 1950s? In Joshua Clover's less-than-charitable summation of the film, he writes that the label's talent "make more hits than money under the shrewd patronage of Leonard Chess, though he seems to love them one and all; it's a family albeit one where the black children get screwed. Surely this is meant to fire our liberal hearts with

outrage.”<sup>66</sup> While Clover gets many more specific points about *Cadillac Records* wrong in his short column, he is right to point to the curiously ritualistic function of the film: why do we need to see this story again?<sup>67</sup> What is the social or political function of *Cadillac Records*’ moral story when everybody already knows?

The fact that African American recording artists were compensated at vastly unfair sums has been widely reported in scholarly sources, in pop culture, and in the autobiographies of many popular performers. In his history of rhythm and blues, Brian Ward writes that

[M]any black artists were locked into extraordinarily exploitative contracts which substantially reduced their capacity to profit from even the records they did sell. When lawyer Howell Begle investigated claims by a number of R&B veterans that they have routinely been deprived of proper payments by their record companies, he discovered that in the 1940s and 1950s most had contracts which paid royalties at a meager rate of between 1 and 4 percent of the retail price of recordings sold, or else provided one-off payments of around \$200 in return for performances which sometimes made millions.<sup>68</sup>

Glenn Altschuler, who also draws on Begle’s study in his study of rock’s social significance, *All Shook Up: How Rock’n’roll Changed America*, cites a portion of Chuck Berry’s autobiography that would later be dramatized in *Chess Records*:

what Berry was told was a “standard contract,” in fact, shorted him on royalties to a much greater extent than standard contracts for white artists: “Berry noticed that Alan Freed and a disc jockey named Russ Fratto were listed as co-composers of the song. Chess told him that the song would get more attention if big names in the industry had an interest in it. ‘With me being unknown,’ Berry recalled, ‘this made sense to

me, especially since he failed to mention that there would be a split in the royalties as well.<sup>69</sup>

The exploitation of black artists as well as the appropriation of black music became such common knowledge that it could be knowingly cited in pop culture. For instance, a 1978 Saturday Night Live sketch parodies the appropriation of blues music. In “Beach Blanket Bimbo from Outer Space,” Carrie Fischer and other white friends dance to rock music on the beach, in a clear parody of “beach movies.” Where the adaptation of blues to lighter rock is an invisible part of the original films, SNL’s writers make this painfully, and comically, obvious in what follows:

Vincent Price: Hi, kids. Remember that recording artist friend I was telling you about? Well, here he is.  
 Annette: [ excited ] Hey look, everybody! It's Chubby Checker! Everyone: CHUBBY CHECKER?!!  
 WOWWWW!!!  
 Chubby Checker: Hi, gang! Do you kids like to have fun?! Everyone: YEAHHHH!!!  
 Chubby Checker: Great! 'Cause there's nothing I like better than entertaining white, middle-class kids on the beach! So come on, everybody! Let's Twist!"<sup>70</sup>

The fact that SNL could so confidently reference this cultural practice underscores its status as household knowledge, something which had been assimilated into mainstream understandings of popular culture. Yet, there is also a key distinction between exploitation and appropriation. Where the exploitative nature of the economic relationships is universally accepted, there is less agreement as to the legacy of appropriation, to what extent the aesthetic and artistic legacies of these musicians have been overshadowed and copied by others. Even Steve Perry, who has written one of the strongest arguments for a history of popular music which emphasizes black and white partnerships in

predominantly positive tones, also qualifies that he is speaking in terms of formal collaboration, not payment of royalties: “I don’t mean to imply that black and white musicians have received anything approaching equal rewards—either in money or acclaim—for their talents. They have not. But to jump from that fact to the conclusion that the story of American music is the story of ‘original’ black music and ‘derivative’ white imitations is too far a leap.”<sup>71</sup> As a case example, Perry cites Greil Marcus’s account of the writing and performance of “Hound Dog” as a case for the racially entangled history of musical production in the twentieth century: “Whites wrote it; a white made it a hit. And yet there is no denying that ‘Hound Dog’ is a ‘black’ song, unthinkable outside the impulses of black music, and probably a rewrite of an old piece of juke joint fury that dated back far beyond the birth of any of these people. Can you pull justice out of *that* maze?”<sup>72</sup>

*Cadillac Records* illustrates how a contemporary, retrospective account of these practices can present an equally difficult “maze” to sort through. In some scenes, the film unambiguously portrays these popular musicians as unfairly exploited, and angry about it. In addition to his frustration with the appropriation of “Sweet Sixteen,” Chuck Berry challenges Len for dividing royalties unfairly. On both accounts, the grounds for his objection are rational and clear.<sup>73</sup> Other scenes represent this history in a more problematic way. For instance, Willie Dixon’s syrupy voice-over makes light of rock’s displacement and cooptation of the blues. In the diegesis, Dixon’s narrative is an audio recording to guide tourists through Chess Records as a historical site. The jocular tone of his account both illustrates and participates with the compromises

necessary to make such shameful or threatening aspects of history palatable to contemporary consumption.

Further summary of *Cadillac Records* does more to illustrate additionally ambivalent and contradictory aspects of the film than to firmly situate any political tendency or argument. In many cases, *Cadillac*'s portrayal of race and music is remarkably resonant with historically dominant modes of representing these subjects. Gabbard notes, for instance, how jazz films in the post-blackface era, nevertheless, routinely continued to narrativize blackness in a similar manner as *The Jazz Singer*. In the 1927 Jolson film, the lead applies blackface at a pivotal moment in the film, which marks the beginning of his successful management and eventual mastery of multiple threats to his masculine identity. Unable to resolve disputes about his career-path with his family, or work up the confidence to fully pursue his love interest, blackface performance provides him with the courage to resolve these problems: "At a crucial moment in the story the son masquerades as an African American male just as he must simultaneously confront both his romantic ties to the Gentile woman and the Oedipal crises in his own family."<sup>74</sup> The efficacy of this narrative marker would seem to expire at the same time that blackface performances fell out of favor. Arthur Knight reports that Hollywood made its last blackface films in 1953.<sup>75</sup> The most comprehensive study of *The Jolson Story* films quotes a review from its re-release in the late 60s which describes how blackface had fallen out of favor by this time:

*The Al Jolson Story* [sic] today is an anachronism, a rather mediocre film biography of one who was a great entertainer in an era now irrevocably past. We cannot unwrite history, so there is no point in pretending it didn't happen: not so many decades ago singers and actors did blacken their faces and



audiences were amused by it. But the reaction to the re-run of *The Al Jolson Story* is proof enough that it can't happen in America any more. The owners of the film may as well put it back in the vault to stay.<sup>76</sup>

Yet, as Gabbard, argues, while blackface performance had fallen out of fashion, the narrative template that *The Jazz Singer* defined could be retained in films from the 1950s on. In *The Benny Goodman Story*, "The hero never puts on blackface, but he does have critical encounters with black musicians who seem to affect his sexuality and emotional expressivity. The mythological characteristics of African Americans that Jack Robin puts on along with burnt cork are acquired by Goodman when blacks are simply nearby."<sup>77</sup> Here, Goodman's mastery of black musical forms, particularly his performance alongside black musicians, provides him a similar form of surrogate masculinity.

This characterization also fits Adrien Brody's performance as Chess Records producer Leonard Chess in *Cadillac Records*. Like Goodman, Chess's proximity to talented black performers allows him to realize his own sense of mastery and masculinity. Because Chess's character formation is defined in reference to the black talent he manages, the identities of these characters are worth considering before returning to Chess. The scene which introduces Muddy Waters frames what contact with the blues and the production of popular music means for the men (whether performers or producers) in this film.

As in *Leadbelly*, the work of Alan Lomax provides a convenient framing story for the rise-to-fame of these African-American musicians. Yet, where the Parks film portrays Lomax with a degree of ambivalence, here Lomax, in contrast to Chess, selflessly launches Waters' career. Their original meeting is portrayed with a sense of predetermination, with Lomax clearly positioned as the primary

reason that Waters would become a musical star. The soundtrack conveys a sense of Waters' destiny, now that Lomax has chosen him: an electric guitar riff, at a time when Waters only played acoustic, accompanies the Lomax car as it speeds to Muddy's modest, rural home.

McKinley Morganfield, as Lomax will address him shortly, is portrayed as unrefined and ignorant. He is startled by Lomax's approaching vehicle, and, with a tremor in his voice, tells his wife to get inside. He sidles away from the front of the house and, as if the passengers would not see him, retreats to the water well to get a drink, averting eye-contact. Lomax exits the car and addresses him confidently: "I'm Alan Lomax . . . I'm recording folk music for the Library of Congress." Waters is initially nonplussed. "Folk music?" he asks. Morganfield, though, is a quick study, and soon accepts the value of committing his music to record. For Len, closeness to and management of black talent confers his masculinity. The film suggests that Waters receives a similar effect from electrification. When Lomax, visibly pleased with the results, plays back the record for Waters, he says, "That's what I sound like, huh?" Lomax replies, "Yes, sir, that's what you sound like," to which Waters says, "Feels like I'm meeting myself for the first time." As compared to *Leadbelly*, in which the lead's skepticism of the Library of Congress project provides the scene with an uncertain tone, in this case, the future Muddy Water's reluctance is overcome in a matter of seconds. The voiceover affirms and extends the transformation that Lomax's recording effected: "And he was [meeting himself for the first time], and he knew it was a man he was meeting, too big for that slave shack he was born in, and too big for that plantation." Lomax, it seems, has not just conferred musical stardom, or a new musical style on Waters, but his masculinity, and

independence. Now that he has been recorded and electrified, Waters walks confidently down the train tracks, fated to succeed.

As with Waters, masculinity figures as the prominent quality in the formation of Chess's character as well. In the scenes that introduce Brody's character, we see an overhead shot of him vigorously making love to a young woman. This shot, along with Brody's star persona as one of the more desirable young actors to debut in the late 2000s,<sup>78</sup> would seem, rather obviously, to establish him as a virile, masculine character. This brief introduction to Brody as Len Chess is shortly followed by a scene in which he is emasculated by his soon-to-be father-in-law. His fiancée's father is dubious of Chess's plans to start a recording studio, and threatens Chess to make good on his promise to take care of his daughter. From the start, then, Chess's masculine identity is equated with his relative success or failure as a businessman and producer. As viewers of the film, both specifically (Chess Records is well known) and generically (musical biopics tend toward hagiography), we know that Chess will do well. He will provide for his wife and become a successful businessman, thereby proving his manhood.

Obviously, Len's record label provides an income that allows him to succeed and prove his masculine worth, but, as a Jewish American managing a roster of African American talent, the racial dynamic of his ownership fits a tendency of filmic representation established with *The Jazz Singer*. Much like the positive correlation of blacks and masculinity in films removed from explicit blackface performances, such as *The Benny Goodman Story*, Len's interaction with his bluesmen solidifies his status as a *man*.<sup>79</sup>

Two blues classics featured in both the film and on the soundtrack—"I'm A Man" and "I'm Your Hootchie Coochie Man"—portray an exaggerated masculine personae: a man of great sexual prowess and unlimited access to sexual gratification. Consider the following lyrical excerpts from these songs:

"I'm Your Hootchie Coochie Man" (Muddy Waters)

Gypsy woman told my momma, before I was born  
 You got a boy-child comin', gonna be a son-of-a-gun  
 Gonna make these pretty women, jump and shout  
 And the world will know, what it's all about

Y'know I'm here  
 Everybody knows I'm here  
 And I'm the hoochie-coochie man  
 Everybody knows I'm here

"I'm A Man" (Bo Diddley)

I'm a man,  
 I spell m-a-n...man.

All you pretty women,  
 Stand in line,  
 I can make love to you baby,  
 In an hour's time.

The line I shoot,  
 Will never miss,  
 The way I make love to 'em,  
 They can't resist.

These overstated expressions of masculinity are, in fact, quite typical of the blues. Ove Sernhede notes two exaggerated personas—either absolutely powerful and powerless—that characterize most blues songs. They write that the “blues thematizes adolescent vacillation between ‘progressive’, self-reinforcing and ‘regressive’ ego-dissolving processes.”<sup>80</sup> “I’m a Man” and “Hootchie Coochie

Man" feature "self-reinforcing" identifications. Crucially, these songs are addressed to a broader audience than a single love interest. They are not addressed to a single lover or potential lover, but to a broader audience listening to these claims of superiority. Thus, the characters sings, "The way I make love to 'em, they can't resist." These singer-characters are less invested in persuading a potential lover than in the self-assurance that "the world will know, what it's all about." Sernhede's definition of the "self-reinforcing" blues song accurately describes these songs. They write that this type of blues song is characterized by the "the offensive macho-texts' grandiose representations and by the music's declamatory aggression and sexual actions."<sup>81</sup> The fact that Chess is introduced with his masculinity under threat (by his fiancé's father) explains his attraction to the exaggerated, macho figures at the center of these songs. While he does not have access to these personas via musical expression, Chess performs a "macho-text" via deportment, language, and interpersonal interactions.

As Len becomes more comfortable with the musicians on his label, he walks with a more macho swagger and talks with slangy bravado, dropping more and more "mother-fuckers" as his status grows as both a producer and man.<sup>82</sup> The masculine effect of blackness is traceable to the performances of white Americans in the blackface tradition in the nineteenth century. In his study of this theatrical tradition, which had too often been easily written off as simply a crude, two-dimensional stereotype, Eric Lott explores the macho affect that blackface provided for white performers:

What appears in fact to have been appropriated were certain kinds of masculinity. To put on the cultural forms of 'blackness' was to engage in a complex affair of manly mimicry. Examples of this dynamic since the heyday of minstrelsy are ready enough at hand—

Elvis, Mailer . . . To wear or even enjoy blackface was literally, for a time, to become black to inherit the cool, virility, humiliation, abandon, or *gaité de couer* that were the prime components of white ideologies of black manhood.<sup>83</sup>

This description aptly accounts for Chess's increasing bravado as the film proceeds and he takes on increasingly 'black' characteristics. We learn that he, like his contracted musicians, has a large sexual appetite which he feeds with affairs on the road. Where Etta James' white father will have little to do with her, Len lavishes attention on the singer and nearly has an affair with her as well. Beyond these descriptions of Chess's sexuality and his increasing command of a 'black' vernacular, the scene which motivates the hiring of volatile harmonica player Little Walter (Columbus Short) most revealingly intersects with discourses of white fascination with black masculinity.

Len approaches Waters after his bandmate, harpist Little Walter had, just the night before, nearly gotten in a duel with other club patrons and caused significant damage to the club. Waters is bashful, half-expecting some request of restitution from Chess, who approaches the guitarist as he is working as a truck-loader: Waters: "We're just here working sir. I thought we was alright boss?" Chess: "C'mon, stop talking to me like I'm a damn plantation owner, huh? . . . I wanna put you on a record" Waters: "A record, you're kidding?" Waters is baffled by both the timing and enthusiasm of Len's request. The condensed narration of the film nearly begs the viewer to conclude that—far from dissuading Chess from associating with him and Walter—the violent spectacle of the nightclub incident actually arouses the interest of the club-owner who had to foot the bill for Little Walter's outburst just the night before.

Here, too, we can situate Chess's seemingly incongruous decision within

the history of racial representations. Lott also describes the historical foundation behind the doublesided attraction of blackness—as a mix of a pleasure and fear—to the white audience:

ideologies of working-class manhood . . . shaped white men's contradictory feelings about black men. Because of the power of the black penis in white American psychic life, the pleasure of minstrelsy's largely white and male audiences derived from their investment in 'blackness' always carried a threat of castration—a threat obsessively reversed in white lynching rituals.<sup>84</sup>

In this case, Len's ownership and management of Chess Records grants him both proximity to violence and danger—which he courts by mimicking the macho exploits of his roster of talent, imitating black vernacular, pursuing affairs, and seeking to dominate his professional field—yet, as the producer, he retains the ability to master and control the same cast of characters that threaten to destroy him.

It may come as some surprise that Chess is so ambiguously portrayed. While this focus draws out some subtleties in his characterization, it is by no means an against the grain reading. Although, as Joshua Clover also notes, the record label is often referred to as a family, we must also clarify that this metaphor is presented unevenly—a power-play by Chess that his recording artists resist, with varying degrees of subtlety, throughout the film. Consider the following scenes: When Muddy Waters gives a radio interview in the South, he effusively praises his white producer, introducing him as the man who gave a poor field hand a shot. He says, “When I was out there I used to sing, ‘Time don't get no better up the road I'm going', so I want to thank old Len Chess here for giving Muddy Waters a chance to shine.” Yet, as they leave the station, Chess

thanks him in return, but Waters is less inclined to repeat his praise, reflecting the fact that such comments, perhaps, were intended to appease a Southern audience more than convey his true feelings. Chess, ignoring the fact that Waters has just declined to repeat his deferential compliment, then presses on about his idea of the label-as-family. In a gesture meant to signify how much he intends to “take care” of this family, Chess offers Muddy an extravagant present, his own Cadillac. Little Walter’s response to the same gift draws even more attention to its manipulative function. The more explosive of the two musicians hugs Chess and, while holding him aloft, exclaims, “You my white daddy!” Later in the film, the label is no longer so flush, and when Waters asks his boss for payment, Len reveals that he routed much of their royalties to the purchase of these cars (even though they had previously been presented as gifts or bonuses).<sup>85</sup> The extravagance of the cars, therefore, figure like a father’s presents to his children, meant to assure his dependents of their abundance without expectation of filling in many details.

Chess’s conflicted and contradictory character is difficult to situate in a genre which has so often aggrandized producers. Custen writes that the classical Hollywood biopic tended to “cultivate the interests of their producers, presenting a world view that naturalizes certain lives and specific values over alternative ones.”<sup>86</sup> *Cadillac Records*, by contrast, presents a far less admirable portrait of its producer-character. On the one hand, Len Chess receives the ambivalent characterization that he deserves, as he is perpetually challenged by his exploited roster of talent; for Chess, as the voiceover informs us, “It was the color of them bills that mattered.” On the other hand, numerous aspects of Chess’s characterization point to a more regressive project: the casting of Adrien



Brody (described as one of the most desirable male actors in popular magazines) shapes the reception of this character, and his ability to access a surrogate masculinity through his work with expressive black musicians places the film within a conservative mode of racial representation.

The portrayal of the manufacture of commercial music stands out as a progressive development. The commercial industry, here, is not just a mere launch pad for great talents, but is lingered upon at numerous crucial plot points: radio play is enabled with bribery, Muddy Waters' career is launched when the Lomax brothers decide he ought to be recorded and electrified, Waters resists recording the Willie Dixon tune "Hoochie Coochie Man," which would become his most popular song, because he believes it is too simple. Thus, *Cadillac Records* effectively illustrates how popular music is the collaborative effort of many to manufacture a commercial product. Yet, at what cost do these numerous qualifications come?

While musical biopics frequently emphasize the lead's foresight in predicting popular taste, Waters is often wrong. In an era that has just recently allowed the extensive portrayal of African American musicians, these characters in *Cadillac Records* are denied the fluid and immediate access to spontaneous expression that have historically been granted to those who sing in Hollywood musicals. How can we reconcile the musical's characteristic investment in personal expression and passion alongside such pessimistic qualification and contextualization? In a study of contemporary musicals, from the 1970s to present, Babington and Evans offer us a way out of this dilemma:

What we see [in musicals since the 70s] is the encounter between a utopian urge (without which the musical, as we know it, would be unrecognizable)

and a dystopian reality given prominence, even predominance, in a way that it never was done before. It is the dynamic of the encounter that is essential, the tension between two conflicting impulses as the utopian drive makes of a more pressing reality what it can. If the bias towards affirmation has to respect the difficulties of less malleable interpretations of reality, the impulse to de-idealization in turn respects the power and nostalgia . . . of the old mythologies.<sup>87</sup>

The double-sided quality of *Cadillac Records'* portrait of race, music, and the 1950s ought to be read, therefore, not as incoherent or contradictory in a pejorative sense, but as channeling the kind of productive ambivalence, whether accidental or purposefully conceived, that explains the popularity of so many Hollywood films.

Robert Ray's *A Certain Tendency of the American Cinema* makes the case that the most successful Hollywood films are not those that are the most conservative, but rather those that are maximally ambivalent or ambiguous. While Ray retains ideological criticism's reading of movies as "massively overdetermined"—that is, their content should not be regarded as arbitrary, but as the compacted expression of so many dominant economic and social forces—he also distinguishes his approach from the tendency of other ideological critics to "simply ignore American Cinema with its 'realist', 'transparent' style whose political effect can be read in advance."<sup>88</sup> In contrast to this reductive approach, Ray argues that we must regard the film text as "decentered" as so multiply overdetermined that it eludes any one-sided analysis: "The film historian, in other words, has an array of factors to consider, each of them 'right' as an object of study, each becoming 'wrong' only if the historian's attention fixes on one as the sole explanation of cinema."<sup>89</sup>

Ray practices such a form of multiply attentive criticism with his explanation of *The Godfather's* popularity by way of its appeal to diverse, seemingly oppositional segments, of the audience.<sup>90</sup> For Ray, it is little coincidence that the *Godfather* was both extraordinarily profitable—setting a new box office record of \$86 million in 1972—and successfully combined ‘right’ and ‘left’ qualities of early 70s film cycles (defined on the right side by Charles Bronson (*Death Wish*), Clint Eastwood (*Dirty Harry*), and Steve McQueen (*Bullitt*) features and on the left by films like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider*, and *The Graduate*) to maximize profitability by satisfying both sectors of the audience. Late 60s, early 70s production was split between ‘left’ and ‘right’ films whose potential for success was limited by its appeal to certain audience segments. In right “street westerns,” starring Bronson, McQueen, or Eastwood, vigilante violence is used to restore social order. In left films, such as *Easy Rider* or *Bonnie and Clyde*, outlaw-heroes attempt to escape the dominant social order. *The Godfather* unites this split audience by providing, for those who would like to see a ‘left’ film as a critical portrayal of systemic corruption in America, and for those who want to see a ‘right’ film as the ruthless operation of a patriarchal culture. Further oppositions are held in balance: the left fantasy of individual freedom is equaled by the right fantasy of absolute authority, and *The Godfather* features outlaw heroes, but they are contained by the family.

Close analysis of the musical biopic—a relentlessly popular and populist genre, one which has consistently drawn greater interest from the audience and the industry than popular critics or academics—reveals similarly ambivalent texts. Much like Ray explains *The Godfather's* efficacy by way of its management of contradictory ideologies, we can read *Cadillac Records* as a contradictory,

equally 'left' and 'right' text.

*Cadillac Records*, like *The Godfather*, works by weighting its oppositions against one another. Here, the pathos of the leads' suffering in racist social and economic contexts is measured against the more transcendent achievements of their cultural production. In other cases, we can see that the scales are less balanced: that is to say, emphasis on any single social good, or on the condemnation of a particular moral vice can, paradoxically, be achieved by way of excusing another, by playing into the logic of another socially dominant view. Consider, in contrast to *Cadillac Records*' more ambivalent portrayal of appropriation, the more passive, appeasing view of the "British invasion" presented in *What's Love Got to Do With It* (1993).

### ***What's Love Got to Do With It: Autonomy at a Cost***

In *The Musical: Race, Gender, and Performance*, Susan Smith outlines the reasons for which the Tina Turner biopic ought to be commended for its feminist approach to the musical. Grouping *What's Love Got to Do With It* with classical musicals such as *The Pirate*, *A Star is Born*, and *Love Me or Leave Me* that also evince anxiety about the power of female voices, Smith argues that *What's Love Got to Do With It* is, unequivocally, the most progressive of these films: "In offering such an emphatic celebration of the woman's emancipation, *What's Love Got to Do With It*'s ending also marks a significant development in the musical's ongoing fascination with the great female singer," with a lead who "breaks ties with the male protagonist . . . [and] asserts her autonomy as a performing self in her own right."<sup>91</sup> Smith rightly celebrates the film's presentation of a self-confident and independent woman. Yet, this laudable treatment is also

achieved by compromise. In *What's Love Got To Do With It*, the feminist narrative of Tina Turner's escape from an abusive partner is achieved by way of elevating rock and pop over rhythm and blues music. Smith misses the fact that the opposition of Ike and Tina is also correlated with their position on rock: where Ike is staunchly protective of black music and angered by the emergence of the "English invasion," Tina openly embraces it.

This antagonism is clearly dramatized in a sequence midway through the film: Ike and Tina are briefly interviewed about rock following a montage of 'home movie' footage accompanied by a radio DJ enthusing over and "Do Wah Diddy Diddy," the "hot sound of the British invasion." This song, about a love-at-first-sight—"Before I knew it she was walking next to me . . . Holdin' my hand just as natural as can be"—also signifies the suddenness of rock's emergence. The melodramatic language of this pop song, the *so much, so soon* of falling in love, also describes the narrative of rock's dominance as the popular audience fell for white performers appropriating the blues. The film makes use of a faux-documentary or television aesthetic here, as the image switches to a grainy, handheld aesthetic that functions as a reality effect. A subtitle identifies this as a "KDSC Interview 1964" and an off-screen voice asks the couple, "So what's your take on the new English music invading the States?" By this point in the film, Ike's abusiveness has been established, and this unresolved conflict between them is palpable even before they speak. In a long-take two-shot, Ike is visibly perturbed by the question. The interview clearly provokes some anxiety in Tina as well, but she, nevertheless discloses, "Well, Ike said there ain't nothin' new about it. It ain't nothin' but black music. I mean, Negro music with an accent. But, uh, I like a lot of it." Tina smiles while answering the this question,

hoping to defuse the tension introduced by Ike's sullen silence. When Ike doesn't add anything further, the interviewer prompts him, "Ike, I sense you don't feel fully appreciated here?" With this, Ike stands and leaves the room.

Tina and Ike's musical preferences are, at multiple key plot points in the film, distinguished as open versus restrictive. Where Tina is open to being recorded by Phil Spector, Ike is opposed to it. In an even more crucial scene, Tina is savagely beaten by Ike after she tells him that many of his songs sound the same. The possibility of a broader range of musical experimentation, as well as the possibility of white involvement in their production is persistently repellant to Ike, and consistently attractive to Tina.<sup>92</sup>

The film's final, triumphant act is enabled by Tina's collaboration with a white producer, modeled after and identified as Roger Davies, the singer's business partner in the early 1990s. The Davies-character, played by James Reyne, is equivalent to Louis McKay in *Lady Sings the Blues*. As Dennis Bingham notes, a common character in biopics featuring female leads is "the male authority figure or driving force, the man who approves of her work and impresses upon her how great she is."<sup>93</sup> In *What's Love Got to Do With It*, this function is first performed by Ike, then Davies. When Tina meets with her would-be-producer, she assures him that she is not "about" being sad regarding her fallout with Ike. Davies asks "So what are you about?" "Rock and roll!" Tina replies, continuing, "I'm talkin' about the energy of it, fun stuff, you hear it in the music of Bowie and Jagger. That's the stuff I want to do, not that old sad sack stuff I used to do with Ike . . . It took me a long time to get Ike out of my system, and now that I've done that, I'm ready." When Davies toasts "to you," Tina corrects him, "to us."<sup>94</sup> This scene is followed by an emphatic performance of the

film's title track, "What's Love Got to Do With It," a song best classified as pop or pop rock, in front of a large and appreciative audience. Halfway through the performance, Bassett is replaced by Tina Turner herself—suggesting that the film has moved close enough to an authentic version of this star performer that this transition is authorized. Turner, as Smith argues, has triumphantly emerged from under the thumb of a controlling and abusive man, but we should not lose sight of the fact that this end is also achieved by abandoning the "sad sack" songs of her rhythm and blues days. The implication of this narrative is familiar: rock represents greater freedom and artistry than blues (or rhythm and blues).

In the dominant history of late twentieth century pop music,

[W]hite rockers are routinely celebrated as enigmatic artists while their black counterparts are made out to be simpleminded conduits of energy and fun. "The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll" once described Motown as a 'wholly mechanical style and sound.' The Beatles, by contrast, were hailed as mop-top Beethovens . . .<sup>95</sup>

This covertly racist history of popular music is unproblematically portrayed in *What's Love Got to Do With It*. It is surprising that the film's association of the 'black' music with confinement and 'white' music with transcendence escapes the notice of critics whose primary interest in the film is its social and political content. Like Smith, hooks's attention to the gender politics of *What's Love Got to Do With It* misses the way that Tina's supposed independence is arrived at by way of capitulating to more mainstream, pop music.

hooks discusses the way that *What's Love Got to Do With It* portrays Ike in a deservedly negative light next to the positive portrayal of Tina. hooks is aptly attentive to the trade-offs that the film takes to balance a palatable, Hollywood version of a female lead against the abjection of a battered woman:

[N]o fucking woman—including Tina Turner—is beautiful in her body when she's being battered. The real Tina Turner was sick a lot. She had all kinds of health problems during her life with Ike. Yet the film shows us this person who is so incredibly beautiful and incredibly sexual. We don't see the kind of contrast Tina Turner actually sets up in her autobiography between 'I looked like a wreck one minute, and then, I went on that stage and projected all this energy.' The film should have given us the pathos of that, but it did not at all, because farce can't give you the pathos of that.<sup>96</sup>

hooks aptly points out that an apparently positive portrayal of a strong female star is misleading whenever the terrible physical and emotional effects of abuse are minimized. Yet, it is also worth noting that this narrative trope (of black women suffering at the hands of black men) has been surprisingly common to Hollywood films about the lives of African American women. This theme defines the opening of *Lady Sings the Blues*, and was most controversially visible in Steven Spielberg's 1985 adaptation of the Alice Walker novel, *The Color Purple*.

I agree with hooks that domestic abuse ought to be more appropriately represented in the popular culture. Nonetheless, we must also heed Ray's observation that "The film historian . . . has an array of factors to consider, each of them 'right' as an object of study, each becoming 'wrong' only if the historian's attention fixes on one as the sole explanation of cinema."<sup>97</sup> We attend to any single element of a film at the risk of excluding and eliding others. *What's Love Got to Do With It*, while breaking ground in its focus on a triumphant black woman does so by way of larger stereotypes about the violent black man and the bitter 'race records' artist.<sup>98</sup>

In this respect, *What's Love Got to Do With It* shares a tendency with *Lady Sings the Blues*—both films depict the extraordinary achievements of these female



African American singers but are also compelled to balance the particularity and progressive potential of their subject alongside more compromising and conservative representational choices. In the case of the Tina Turner film, her success comes at the cost of the integrity of black artists to stand apart from the (white) mainstream since these spheres (contrasted with Tina's openness to rock and pop) are entirely associated with Ike's abusive restrictiveness. *Lady Sings the Blues*, by contrast, sacrifices its own heroine, portraying Holiday as out-of-control next to the fictionally perfect man who stabilizes her.

While these films take some clear trade-offs in elevating the life-stories of these black female artists, the ambivalence of *Cadillac Records* is so thorough that it is more difficult to situate. Yet, if the social representations in play in this film are too tangled to unpack, we can discuss the film in terms of genre more conclusively. *Cadillac Records* trades and expands on crucial aspects of its generic lineage as both a musical and a biopic. In terms of the musical, *Cadillac* builds upon a long-standing self-reflective tendency of the backstage musical, not only taking us behind the scenes as we follow musical performers, but highlighting the role of the producer in the creation of popular music. This representational move dovetails with a characteristic of the biographical film as well. While the musical has long tended towards reflexivity, the biopic (a genre devoted to promoting entertainment) has been described as a "producer's genre."<sup>99</sup> Yet, according to Custer's definition, this has typically happened by proxy, as entertainer's embody the values of those constructing the film. *Cadillac Records* literalizes the biopic as a producer's genre by placing such a figure at the center of the film. This ambivalent portrait of a producer in the "producer's genre" offers just the sort of *apparent* contradiction that has long sustained the musical.

Like the backstage musical, *Cadillac Records* takes us behind the scenes to see the careful management and packaging of talent by business-minded producers in so far as this will increase the entertainment value of the film and reinforce popular ideologies of entertainment consumption.

*Cadillac Records* succeeds in reflecting back to the consumer an ideal image of himself and his taste: an enlightened filmgoer who both wishes to know about all the racist, sexist, and otherwise scandalous aspects of the historical figure of phenomenon being portrayed without, at the same time, renouncing the ability of this entertainment to function as an escapist diversion. Adorno writes that “what the gramophone listener actually wants to hear is himself, and the artist merely offers him a substitute for the sounding image of his own person which he would like to safeguard as a possession.”<sup>100</sup> We can position the filmgoer similarly. The incoherence or ambivalence of the film, then, reflects the contradictions in the popular ideologies that are maintained in its social context.

A *bizpic* like *Cadillac Records*, at first blush, appears to be more truthful than biopics which focus more exclusively on the star as self-making. While musical producers have long played a token role in the biopic. (*Ray*, for instance, features Hisham Abed in a supporting role as Charles’s producer) *Cadillac Records* placement of Chess as the most important figure in the film is unusual. As a matter of course, managers and producers appear in nearly all musical biopics, but in bit roles as level-headed geeks who encourage the lead to find his own voice, and often do little more than smile and nod behind the recording studio Plexiglas. In *Cadillac Records*, by contrast, Chess is both the architect and profiteer of his talents’ success.

Jane Feuer's study of the backstage musical provides an analogous way of understanding this move in a musical biopic. Discussing the effect of this representational strategy—which would seem to puncture, or “demystify” the illusionism of the classical Hollywood musical—Feuer clarifies the end-game of the behind-the-scenes tendency of this genre: “Such a technological education, while demystifying in a literal sense, becomes mystifying at the level of audience impact, as we see film technology as a new form of spectacle, a new show.”<sup>101</sup> This description seems to match the effect of sequences in *Cadillac Records* which take us behind the scenes of both the 1950s and of the production of these musical heroes. In this film, we see numerous negative portrayals of both the music business (Len's willingness to bribe radio DJs) and the social world (the persistence of racism) that are disillusioning. Yet, this exposé-mode tendency injects the film with a sense of pathos that would not be present in a more consistently romantic depiction of 1950s musical production. In this case, we can amend Feuer's characterization to include not only *technology* as a kind of *show* but the presence of ambivalent lead characters and a divisive, even racist social world. Babington's application of Dyer's “Entertainment and Utopia” to post-70s musicals provides a way of understanding the attraction of pessimistic revisions—as, simply, another mode of pathos. If anyone would argue that Dyer's *energy, abundance, and intensity* survive in *Cadillac Records*, these qualities exist in endlessly qualified and revised iterations. Babington and Evans successfully account for the place of these characteristics in contemporary musicals defined, in part, by “deidealization.” They write that,

the major new films—even one as caustic as *Nashville*—cannot simply be seen in terms of irony

and deconstruction. Using Dyer's categories again, another way of putting things might be that two of the most important elements in the traditional musical move into the background in many of the films we are talking about. These are 'transparency' and 'community', the sings of perfect relationships between, in the first case, individuals, and, in the second, individuals and institutions. 'Energy' and 'abundance', more impersonal categories, remain in the foreground, but the chief inflection is that much of the weight of affirmation is place with what Dyer calls 'intensity'—the celebration of feeling, even though that feeling may have painful or negative aspects.<sup>102</sup>

Yet, where Feuer's description about exposé as another kind of spectacle would seem to fit *Cadillac Records*, her characterization of another break in the illusionism—the use of direct address—of the musical is somewhat more difficult to reconcile with this film's depiction of exploitation and appropriation:

When performers in the musical turn to face us directly, we do enter another register, but as we have seen, the potentially disorienting effects of the break in narrative are minimized—by the presence of the audience in the film and by mechanisms of identification. Even when the break in register does throw us out of the narrative it's for the purpose of praising show business, not burying it.<sup>103</sup>

With *Cadillac Records*, as is the case with any musical biopic, there is an obvious imperative to positively portray the music and musical artists featured in the film. The popularity of this genre can be explained in part by the existence of a tie-in market for the artist's back catalog and soundtrack album. Still, these tie-ins will have little appeal to consumers if they are not initially drawn in by the central product, in this case, the dynamic representation of a compelling life-story paired with an equally appealing catalogue of popular songs, which is all

to say, the musical biopic must produce a representation of popular music that is, in many respects, inviting and appealing to the consumer. That said, *Cadillac Records'* vision of the recording industry is far more uneven and pessimistic than Feuer's quote would imply. Where Feuer is describing the effect of stylistic breaks in identification, we can think about the same alternations between a more positive or ambiguous relationship with the audience in terms of *Cadillac Records'* alternation between a romantic and a pessimistic, revisionist view of its subject. The film's persistent interest in exposing and redressing problems of the industry forces our attention in this direction, and makes it rather impossible to regard the text as uncomplicatedly romantic or conservative. As Richard Dyer has argued in his work on the musical:

The fact that professional entertainment has been by and large conservative in this century should not blind us to the implicit struggle within it . . . show business's relationship to the demands of patriarchal capitalism is a complex one. Just as it does not simply 'give the people what they want' . . . it does not simply reproduce unproblematically patriarchal-capitalist ideology. Indeed, it is precisely on seeming to achieve both these often opposed functions simultaneously that its survival largely depends.<sup>104</sup>

Dyer's outline of the musical's ability "to achieve both these often opposed functions simultaneously" recalls Tasker's "account," and Ray's notion of left *and* right tendencies—all critical understandings of popular cinema that make a case for its enduring popularity by way of its ideological ambivalence.<sup>105</sup> These analytical models are not simply evasive but accurately attend to the contradictory textuality of many a Hollywood feature. It is this mode of analysis that best suits *Cadillac Records*, a far more complicated and contradictory text than the long-standing (reductive) biases against the musical biopic would have

us believe. The following chapter will continue to analyze the split-legacy of the musical biopic—which has, historically, varied its representation of the tension between performance and composition as labor versus expression, and a view of entertainment as constituted by industrial or individual talent.

### CHAPTER III: LOVE AND SONG PERFORMANCE IN THE CLASSICAL AND POST-CLASSICAL MUSICAL BIOPIC

I concluded the previous chapter with an analysis of *Cadillac Records*, an ambivalent text which moves between critical and nostalgic representations of its subject. *Cadillac Records* presents popular music as both a business product and the creation of individual talents. In this chapter, which is more attentive to the formal and stylistic characteristics of the musical biopic than its cultural politics, I continue to analyze the dual representation of work and artistry in these films. I find that the weight of emphasis has shifted from the 1970s to today. Whereas musical biopics from the 1970s through the 1990s tend to emphasize the labor involved in the production of music, examples from the 2000s are structured more like classical musicals, situating musical performance as more spontaneous and expressive. To chart this shift, I compare three films representative of the first era—*The Buddy Holly Story* (1978), *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), and *Sid and Nancy* (1986)—to three representative of the second era: *Ray* (2004), *Beyond the Sea* (2004), and *Walk the Line* (2005). The balance struck between similarity and difference qualifies the musical biopic for study as a genre, something which has been questioned by other critics.

In 1978, Dave Marsh complained that the interests of recent, musical films are almost too diffuse to discuss collectively: “The current wave of rock-oriented movies . . . share too little to give them an adequate center, much less the distinction of a genre. There isn’t even a truly universal style here . . . Nor is there any agreement on what function popular music ought to play.”<sup>1</sup> Depending on which music-centered film you consider, Marsh writes, music

serves as the backdrop for “business, dancing, comedy, or romantic melodrama.”<sup>2</sup> While Marsh is accurate to identify a range of variation in “musical films,” this discussion can be focused more effectively by attending to the subset of musical biopics. My analysis of musical biopics from the 1970s through the 2000s reveal patterns of consistency and evolution.

Studying *The Buddy Holly Story*, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, and *Sid and Nancy* compared to *Ray*, *Beyond the Sea*, and *Walk the Line*, I find significant differences between these two sets of films located within the same overarching framework—in which romantic coupling and the performance of song sequences remain consistent generic expectations which these films are compelled to work within, against, or redefine. Comparing these films, I chart the evolution of the musical biopic, paying particular attention to its relationship to narrative and formal structures defined by the classical Hollywood musical. Specifically, I attend to the relationship between the film narrative and musical numbers, analyzing how this relationship has evolved from the classical Hollywood musical to the post-classical musical biopic.

While musical biopics of the late 70s through the mid 80s rarely integrate the numbers with the narrative, this changes in the mid-2000s, when musical biopics regularly integrate the two, in the manner of a classical musical. These distinct treatments of numbers and narrative correlate with different portrayals of the individuals at the center of these stories. The avoidance of integration in films of the 1970s and 1980s produces atypical portrayals of both genres encompassed by the musical biopic, as both the power and romance of musical performance (mainstay of the musical) and the individual (mainstay of the biopic) are significantly curtailed. Musical biopics of the 2000s have restored the



more traditional (and, one could argue, conservative) tendencies of these genres, emphatically reinstating the “unitary individual” who “triumphs over adversity” because of and in spite of his extraordinary musical skills.<sup>3</sup> Through close analysis of these films, I illustrate how the contemporary musical biopic is increasingly characterized by the structure of the classical Hollywood musical.

Rick Altman sets a relevant precedent for my project in *The American Film Musical*. While previous scholarship drew a firm distinction between the backstage musical (discussed at greater length in Chapter One) and other variations of the film musical, Altman argues that the backstage musical (despite semantic variation from the broader genre) can and should still be read as participant with the broader genre of the musical:

[T]he backstage musical has usually been considered a category by itself, having little in common with films which do not take place in and around the Broadway theater. This emphasis on semantics has not served the musical well; by identifying the subgenre with its setting rather than with a particular syntax (replicable in other circumstances), critics have privileged both a narrow range of films and a limited approach to them.<sup>4</sup>

Where scholars had previously mistaken such semantic variation for syntactical difference as well, Altman points out how much the backstage musical shares with the musical genre as a whole. I make a similar move with the contemporary musical biopic by comparatively analyzing this subgenre with the classical Hollywood musical.

Focusing on the musical-half of the contemporary musical biopics, I find that post-2000 examples deviate from the path expected of them in extant scholarship. While most critics of the musical discuss the contemporary musical (including the musical biopic) as evacuating the genre of its spontaneity and

romance, I find that the most recent examples in this genre have reinstated the tendencies of the classical Hollywood musical— to dynamically integrate performances of numbers with the narrative. While musical biopics traditionally separate lyrical content from the performer’s state of mind, post-2000 films present songs as immediate expressions of the lead character’s emotions. In this way, the structure of new musical biopics is closely related to the classical musical. In both genres, music is deployed narratively, as the instantaneous expression of a character’s desires.

The dual-focus narrative figures as another vital point of connection between the musical and the musical biopic. Altman argues that a primary difference between the musical and other film genres is the observance of a dual-focus narrative in place of the more common single-focus narrative. He describes the single-focus narrative, and its inadequacy in accounting for the musical as follows:

It seems clear that most films follow the destiny of a single character, integrate other characters and happening into his/her career, motivate the plot by reference to his/her psychology, and depend on the twin chains of chronological progression and causal sequence. Attempts to analyze the musical following these principles have consistently come up short, however, for like many popular genres, the musical operates only in part according to the model of psychological motivation.<sup>5</sup>

The dual-focus narrative, by contrast, foregrounds romantic coupling (in place of a central character’s pursuits and psychological motivations) as the film’s primary catalyst. Altman effectively abbreviates the dual-focus narrative as proceeding not from “A→B→C” but “A/B, C/C.”<sup>6</sup> While this distinction accurately accounts for the musicals in Altman’s corpus, the “single focus

narrative” describes the protagonist of many musical biopics very well. As other critics (such as Joshua Clover and Glenn D. Smith Jr.) have noted, psychological motivation remains a defining characteristic of the biopic. The musical biopic shares the biopic’s emphasis on a great individual and the rise of their career. The musical star’s ability to reconcile this pursuit alongside a personal relationship is also a part of the musical biopic. Thus, the musical biopic dynamically portrays both Altman’s single and dual focus narratives. When representing music parallel to love relationships, the genre exemplifies the dual focus mode. When emphasizing music making as an obstacle to the formatting of close personal relationships, it works in the single focus mode.

### **Numbers and Narrative in the Classical Hollywood Musical**

It is a well known convention of the classical Hollywood musical that characters suddenly break into song. As opposed to the musical biopic, where singing is limited to professional, on-stage performances, in musicals characters transition to song within a single scene, accompanied by non-diegetic music. Consider the following examples from two classical Hollywood musicals of the 1950s.

#### *The Band Wagon*

In *The Band Wagon* (1953), Fred Astaire’s washed-up Tony Hunter exchanges pleasantries in a train station with the now-more-famous Ava Gardner, playing herself, who is mobbed by press photographers. She says to Tony, “Honestly, isn’t all this stuff a bore?” Non-diegetic orchestral music plays faintly in the background as Gardner leaves and a porter remarks: “Those poor movie stars, people just won’t let them alone, will they?” Tony, sarcastically,

replies, “No, I don’t know how they stand it.” Tony segues to a performance, snapping and strutting as he sings: “I’ll go my way by myself, all alone in a crowd.” Typical to classical Hollywood musicals, the transition from dramatic to musical sequence is effected within a single shot, within the same dramatic space and with non-diegetic musical accompaniment. The lyrical content of the numbers matches the narrative situation. When Tony sings, “By Myself,” he literally is “by [himself], alone . . . finding [his] way, alone,” wondering what to make of his new anonymity.

The following number works similarly in terms of style and narrative development as Tony acquaints himself with the new Broadway. At first startled that a former theater has become a penny arcade, Tony peruses the new amusements and takes this transformation in stride, appropriating this location as another stage for song and dance. This number (“When There’s a Shine on Your Shoes”) marks the point when the “old” Tony recognizes that he can co-exist in the new world of amusements, as “shoe shining” alludes to Astaire’s dancing as well as a literal shoe-shining stand at the penny arcade. While in the first scene, Tony was baffled by his waning popularity, by the second number he has regained his determination, using the penny arcade as a dynamic forum for an Astaire performance. In this way, both “By Myself” and “Shoes” work narratively. They are not excerptible routines that stand apart from the story, but rather, dramatize Tony’s two-part recognition of and adjustment to unfamiliar developments in entertainment. These performances express Tony’s subjectivity: first his loneliness and bemusement at his unpopularity; and second his attempt to find a place in the new entertainment context. The numbers, thus, do not take

viewers out of the narrative, but align them more closely with the central character by dynamically expressing his thoughts.

### *Gigi*

In *Gigi* (1958), singing performances are again situated as instantaneous expressions of subjectivity consistent with characters' thoughts and feelings. Honoré (Maurice Chevalier) sings the carefree "Thank Heaven for Little Girls," while strolling through the park in an exuberant, appreciating-the-pleasures-of-life mood. Honoré and Gaston (Louis Jourdan) exchange phrases in "It's a Bore," each singing lines that reflect his worldview: Gaston is exhausted while Honoré is excited. "I Remember It Well" works similarly with Honoré and Mme. Alvarez (Hermione Gingold) offsetting each other's remembrances: Honoré's are fuzzy, while Madame's are sharp. Thomas Elsaesser writes that Minnelli's misè-en-scene in this film is often arranged as a projection of his characters' feelings:

[W]hen Louis Jourdan, in utter confusion about his feelings, rushes to the Jardin du Luxembourg to sing the title number of *Gigi*, Minnelli leads him into a . . . wholly subjective landscape of imagination, pregnant with the symbols of his newly discovered love . . . Such a confrontation with their innermost worlds always gives the characters a kind of spontaneous certainty from which, ultimately they derive their energy.<sup>7</sup>

As in *The Band Wagon*, *Gigi*'s transitions from speaking to singing are often effected within the same space, without a cut, and accompanied by non-diegetic music. Though this tendency did not seem strange to spectators in the classical era, the transitions between dramatic and singing sequences appear abrupt and awkward to contemporary film spectators. Discussing "the new movie musical" in 1980, J.P. Telotte wrote, "In these films, it is no longer proper for a person to suddenly burst into song . . . whenever anyone does engage in

such activities, it is usually within a finitely restricted arena.”<sup>8</sup> Recent films marketed as musicals such as *Chicago* (2002) and *Moulin Rouge* (2001) limit singing and dancing to rehearsal areas or stages (and fantasy sequences sprung from them) rather than the diegetic spaces of everyday life, which were frequently used for such performances in classical Hollywood musicals.

The most important aspect of the typical relationship between the dramatic and musical sequences in the classical Hollywood musical is the fact that it allows singing to function as instantaneous expression. Timothy Scheurer describes the relationship: “the inner reality of feelings, emotions, and instincts are given metaphoric and symbolic expression through the means of music and dance.”<sup>9</sup> Musical numbers, thus, indicate deeper emotional territory than the dramatic sequences. When characters really feel something, they sing it right away. In *West Side Story* (1961), Tony sings “Maria” at the moment he realizes he’s in love just as *The Band Wagon*’s Tony sings “By Myself” the instant he considers his aloneness. Thomas Elsaesser takes a similar view of numbers as moments of recognition and release: “It is precisely when . . . emotional intensity becomes too strong to bear that [the performers have] to dance and sing in order to give free play to the emotions that possess them.”<sup>10</sup> In a pair of films about the vaudeville legend Fanny Brice, *Funny Girl* and *Funny Lady* (1975), this convention of classical musical is retained. A song, with full orchestration, is always available to Fanny when inspiration strikes (e.g., the “Nicky Arnstein” motif in the first film and the performance of “How Lucky Can You Get” in the second). Yet, even Barbara Streisand, the star of these films, judged them to be “old-fashioned” and “corny,” reflecting the diminished effect of this convention.<sup>11</sup> Marc Miller also notes how films identified as traditional musicals were both out

of step with both the expectations of popular audiences of the late 60s and 70s as well as unprofitable:

Usually costing \$10 million to \$20 million when the average movie went for \$4 million or less, most musicals of the late 1960s and early 1970s recouped less than half their budgets. For one thing, most weren't very good [e.g. *Half a Sixpence* or *Song of Norway*] . . . For another, the traditional values they trumpeted were viewed as irrelevant or ridiculous.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to the classical musical's close alignment between emotions and numbers, musical biopics of the 70s and 80s increasingly dissociated song performances from sudden emotional inspiration. In *The Buddy Holly Story* (1978) and *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), as in the Streisand films, the ups-and-downs of the star's career still constitutes the primary narrative. The star's songbook and their powerful performances are still featured, but the songs are not closely integrated with the narrative. This more low-key style of representing musical performance was also less costly than the extravagant Hollywood musicals of the past. Such films from the 1970s and 80s position music as an artistic form and a career choice more than a forum for personal expression. The performer, simply, has a knack for a particular musical style, which leads to a career choice that forces him to adjust to a demanding lifestyle. This life-story is the dominant point of interest of these films, not the deployment of songs to match and heighten narrative developments on screen.

Robert Gittler's *The Buddy Holly Story* is typical. Here, the star-musician (Gary Busey) rises to fame and performs in ever larger concerts. Buddy goes from performing in private garages and public roller rinks in rural Texas to national television specials and the Apollo. Though the film features twelve of Buddy's songs, they are treated as interpretations of a popular form, not as an

expression of his immediate feelings. While Judith Bloch criticizes *The Buddy Holly Story* for “writing out” other influences—“The implication is rather that Holly’s ‘jungle music’ sprang from the mind of a lone genius in a small Texas town somehow cut off from communication with the rest of the country”—the film writes out not just musical influences but any personal ones.<sup>13</sup> The emphasis is always on “the sound” and not the individual feeling. We track Buddy from gig to gig and studio to studio; we see him fall in love and leave his hometown for the big city, but his music is never presented as autobiographical. Judging by the film, Holly’s talent is songwriting, not expressing himself. Buddy’s brand of rock’n’roll is powerful precisely because it is communal, something that millions of young fans can relate to, not because it is personal, individualized expression.<sup>14</sup>

Musical biopics such as *The Buddy Holly Story*, like the “backstage musical,” derive dramatic tension between the lead characters’ on-stage performances and their private lives.<sup>15</sup> In *The Buddy Holly Story*, the difficult choices that the singer must make are a result of his musical career. As he is compelled to go on tour and move from Texas to New York, he is forced to choose new friends, lovers, and associates. The economic necessity that the singer continually perform produces a split identity between the performer as individual and the performer as public entertainer. The narrative content of songs is incidental next to the pressing, material imperative that the singer continue to perform them. The “heartbeat” of such films resides in this tension between the performer’s attempt to sustain a professional *and* a private life. Cynthia Hanson notes that in these biopics, “the entertainer’s public success has been juxtaposed with private struggles.”<sup>16</sup> In such films, the singer’s songs are



part of a professional performance, not a direct expression of their emotions. Economic incentive, as in *Why Do Fools Fall in Love* (1998), or addiction-to-the-stage, as in *The Jolson Story* (1946), dictate the performer's life, with the singers having limited control over their performances. The arbitrary nature of what they sing and when they perform is reflected by the equally loose placement of songs in these films. In films like *The Buddy Holly Story*, the drama does not incorporate the songs, but focuses, instead, on the frenetic lifestyle of the popular performer.

This tension is dramatized in the biopic of the late Tejano pop star *Selena* (1997). Selena's tour bus has broken down and members of her band try to flag down passing cars for assistance. Selena (Jennifer Lopez), of course, has better luck than her bandmates. A couple of young men screech to a stop, wondering if it really is "Selenas[sic]." Though they ruin their car attempting to tow her tour bus, they declare "Anything for Selenas! . . . This bumper's goin' on my garage with a sign that says: this bumper was pulled off by the bus of Selenas." Though Selena is uncomfortable with such star-struck treatment, the rest of her band find it hilarious. They tease her with the boys' mispronunciation of her name. This scene summarizes the film's central dramatic interest. Here, as in many other musical biopics, the star must come to terms with her dual identity as a private person and a public performer.

Music in the traditional pop performer biopic functions dramatically because of what it deprives the central character of, not what it enables him or her to express. For instance, in *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), the central conflict between the singer/songwriter Loretta Lynn (Sissy Spacek) and her husband Doolittle (Tommy Lee Jones) intensifies as the demands of Loretta's professional

schedule lead him to become increasingly jealous and unfaithful. Her music becomes an obligation and a strain on her relationship with Doolittle. The deferral of romance in *Selena* is another example of this tendency. In a significant shot, the precociously successful singer, boarding her tour bus, glances wistfully at a happy, anonymous couple necking on a park bench. The enormous cost of work and fame is the major point of emphasis in these pictures. Cynthia Rose writes that rock biopics consistently rely on “some mixture of three formats: the struggle, the price exacted and/or the tragic fate.”<sup>17</sup> The content of the performers’ music becomes a side point next to the story of their struggles. With music positioned as an obligation that creates conflict, certain lyrics are sung to fulfill a contract, not because the character identifies with the content at the time of performance.

Even when the content of the performer’s songs is treated as expressive rather than compulsory, the difficult process of songwriting is emphasized. In *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, we see Loretta writing “You Ain’t Woman Enough (To Take My Man)” well after she catches her husband cheating. “Honky Tonk Girl” is composed haltingly, with intentionally uncertain notes. Here, the spontaneity of the classical musical is sacrificed in favor of a more faithful depiction of touring and songwriting as labor.

Where earlier musical biopics are truer to the work involved in the production of music than the energy contained within it, recent films in this genre (*Ray*, *Walk the Line*, and *Beyond the Sea*) are more invested in the structure of music from musicals. Music as a spontaneous emotional expression is drawn from the musical while the more realistic deployment of singing and performance (on stages or in recording studios and always by professionals) is

drawn from the biopic. Previous films in the musical biopic genre have worked like musicals, but less fully and only in rare moments.

*La Bamba* and *The Buddy Holly Story* each position just one song as an expression of personal, romantic feeling. Buddy draws "True Love Ways" from his wife's turn of phrase and later, just after phoning her from New York to Iowa, opens a live set with this song "for someone special." However, the diegetic world that Buddy inhabits does little to facilitate this relationship. Here, as Buddy speaks with his wife just before this performance, he is blocked in a claustrophobic *mise-en-scène* between backstage technicians and an on-going stage performance, which forces him to plug an ear, and strain to communicate above the din. Hanson notes that even with "True Love Ways," the song performed with the most subjective motivation in the film, an impersonal, exterior style is maintained, orienting the spectator more from the crowd's perspective than Buddy's: "[Buddy] perches on a stool, bathed in red light, backed by an orchestra. As the camera circles the stool, the low angle of the shot places the viewer at Holly's feet. This is as intimate as the performance gets. He stows the stool, the lights come up, and he launches into several familiar, up-tempo tunes."<sup>18</sup> "Donna" is used similarly in *La Bamba*: Richie Valens is dating a girl of the same name. Falling in love, he phones her to play the tune written especially for her. In both cases, these songs are tied to the singer's non-musical desires. Still, the process of performance (*Buddy*) and songwriting (*La Bamba*) remain the stronger point of emphasis, restricting the liberating quality of their music. Significantly, both dedications are issued over the phone, as Buddy and Richie are unable to be any more present to their would-be-lovers due to career obligations.

These dedications, as such, are autobiographical, but not in the manner of a classical musical, where songs figure more purposefully in relation to the narrative, allowing characters to realize what they want and attain it.

Citing the performance of *Gigi*'s title song as an example, Elsaesser describes the emotional satisfaction that numbers in the classical Hollywood musical provide their leads, "Minnelli's typical protagonists are all . . . cunning day-dreamers, and the *mise-en-scène* follows them, as they go through life, confusing—for good or ill—what is part of their imagination and what is real, and trying to obliterate the difference between what is freedom and what is necessity."<sup>19</sup> The stars of *La Bamba* and *The Buddy Holly Story*, by contrast, are too burdened by their careers to realize their desires this fully. The performances in these films, though still professions of love, are imbued with an overwhelming sense of the "the difference between what is freedom and what is necessity" and the difficulty of sustaining a life on the road *and* a romantic relationship. Buddy and Ritchie, nascent rock stars that they may be, are more realists than daydream believers. As opposed to Minnelli's musicals, in these musical biopics the scenography emphasizes the isolation and confinement, even in song performance sequences. Singing provided the leads of classical musicals a forum for personal, romantic expression; the very opposite is true of the contemporary musical biopic, where the commitment to a career becomes a primary obstacle in formation of functional romantic relationships.

In his study of the classical Hollywood musical, John Mueller provides an effective framework for gauging the degree of integration between the narrative and musical numbers. Analyzing Fred Astaire films, Mueller categorizes the degree of integration between these elements according to six modes, ranging

from “numbers which are completely irrelevant to the plot” to “Numbers which advance the plot by their content.”<sup>20</sup> In terms of the films I analyze, the relationship between the story and song falls consistently between numbers three through six.<sup>21</sup> For instance, the repetitive use of “Honky Tonk Girl” in *Coal Miner’s Daughter* can be adequately characterized by Mueller’s fifth mode: “Numbers which advance the plot, but not by their content. Among those numbers which ‘move the plot along,’ it is useful to distinguish between those whose content is responsible for the plot advancement and those for which this is not the case.”<sup>22</sup> As in this mode, the fact that this song of Lynn’s is a “good” song that enables her to take her first steps toward stardom is significant, but that fact that the song is “Honky Tonk Girl” and not another tune of comparable skill does not matter. As Mueller explains, by way of such performances, “The plot is advanced, but the exact content of the number is irrelevant—except, of course, that it should be good (or bad) enough to make the producer’s or audience’s judgment credible.”<sup>23</sup> It is a large step from this mode, to the most integrative one, wherein songs “advance the plot by their content.” Mueller continues:

The numbers most often considered to be ‘truly integrated’ are those which take up the action and advance the plot by their content. During these numbers something happens which changes the characters or the situation, and a test of integration in this sense would be whether the number can be cut out of the musical without leaving a noticeable gap. As director Vincente Minnelli puts it, the number should ‘progress the story.’<sup>24</sup>

It is particularly significant that Mueller cites Minnelli, widely regarded as the most accomplished and artistic of all musical directors, to characterize the most integrated of Hollywood musicals. This reflects the fact that, traditionally, the musical is defined by a value which prescribes, the more integrated, the better.

Mueller revealingly opens his essays, “A considerable literature has grown in the quest for the ideally integrated musical—a musical where song, dance, and story are artfully blended to produce a combined effect.”<sup>25</sup> As Mueller indicates here, the value of integration is expressed not only by artist-practitioners such as Minnelli, but is, additionally, reinforced by critics who equate such a “combined effect” with the most successful films of the genre.<sup>26</sup> To cite an additional instance of the dominance of this value in criticism of the Hollywood musical, note how “organicism” is emphasized in the following critical article on *Oklahoma!*:

An important and defining feature of the production of *Oklahoma!* was the way in which the songs and the radical choreography were woven carefully into the plot. It was the first musical in which the libretto, score, character and plot development, decor, stage direction and choreography worked together to produce a seamless whole.<sup>27</sup>

Where Mueller is participant with rather than critical of this approach, films such as *The Buddy Holly Story*, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, and, to a greater extent, *Sid and Nancy* point to another mode of the musical film—one that does not strive towards integration as a primary value but, rather, reject it in favor of a more ‘realistic’ placement of musical songs in the narrative.

### **Numbers and Narrative in the Contemporary Musical Biopic I: *The Buddy Holly Story***

*The Buddy Holly Story* exhibits a large number of the film-musical's conventional characteristics. First, the story could be described as a dual-focus narrative, as Buddy's rise to musical stardom is accompanied by (and put in dialogue with) his coupling with a new girlfriend. At one point, Buddy makes a

bid for Maria's affection by likening their relationship to his musical career. When Maria (played by Maria Richwine) tells Buddy that her Puerto Rican family is reticent to let her date outside their community, Buddy responds, "Maria, I just went through this with people who said that a white act couldn't play with a colored tour. We got along fine. We still are." Though the dual-focus structure of the film is less pronounced or dominant than in many other musical biopics—Buddy's Texas girlfriend is quickly forgotten, and Maria is not present in the first third of the film—this parallel is so clearly drawn that it can still be properly described as a dual-focus narrative.

Rick Altman describes the legacy of this story structure in the musical: "The Hollywood musical—often a particularly transparent bearer of dual-focus pastoral structures—regularly begins by introducing same-sex friends or a mismatched heterosexual couple. For the film to progress, the "wrong" couples must be done away with, so that the "right" matches can be concluded."<sup>28</sup> Fitting this outline, Buddy moves from a mismatched girlfriend in his hometown of Lubbock, Texas, who believes that his musical aspirations are nothing more than a hobby which must be outgrown, to a Puerto Rican woman in the music business who, obviously, values popular music and matches Buddy's enduring attraction to otherness (for instance, New York City vs. Lubbock and African American soul musicians vs. white country musicians). Thus, Buddy's growth into a rock star is accompanied by the dual-focus narrative of his replacement of the wrong woman with the right one.

In addition to the observance of the dual-focus narrative, *The Buddy Holly Story* works within the parameters of the backstage musical. As defined by Martin Rubin, the backstage musical is set in "the venue where the show is made

and [centers] on the relationships between the performers who make it.”<sup>29</sup> Bruce Babington and Peter Williams add, not coincidentally, that a dual-focus narrative is a typical component of the backstage musical: “A show is launched successfully, a performing career is followed (shading, if the basis is factual, into the ‘biopic’), performers meet and love in that metaphoric equivalent of perfect performing and perfect relationship.”<sup>30</sup> Numerous scenes in *The Buddy Holly Story* are centered around dramatic goings-on bookending stage performances. For instance, the tension before the Crickets appearance at the Apollo is heightened by the manager’s explanation that this is the first time a white group has ever played this venue. Additionally, Backstage musicals place off-stage space on-screen, exceeding the range of access (compensating for acting in place of ‘real’ performance) that a live concert or even a concert-film could conceivably provide. *The Buddy Holly Story* makes use of this technique in a scene where Buddy, following a raucous audience’s demand to see him perform again, joins Eddie Cochran for an improvised performance of “Whole Lotta Shakin.” As Buddy’s performance grows increasingly mannered and exuberant, we are also privy to the annoyance of Holly’s drummer who is put-off by Holly’s growing popularity and seemingly boundless enthusiasm for playing more-and-more gigs. Holly’s relationship with the Crickets constitute the second most important relationship in the film. Indeed, Buddy’s estrangement from his hometown bandmates is repaired at a melodramatically inopportune moment, as his original drummer and bassist pledge, with Maria’s encouragement, to reunite with Holly just hours before his death.

Both of these structures—the dual-focus narrative and the backstage subgenre—like the film-musical as a whole, can be characterized as romantic, as



celebrations of the power of popular music and love. While *The Buddy Holly Story* continues to work within these film-musical traditions, it does so in a dramatically recasted fashion. *Buddy* includes a parallel romantic plot that can be described as a dual-focus narrative. Yet, it is crucial to note how curtailed its pairing of romance and music is compared to the more dominant emphasis on romantic coupling in prior musicals.

Comparing the musical biopic to the musical, there is an obvious distinction that one character is typically the unequivocal center of focus. Inevitably, the biopic encourages us care more about the musical star than their supportive companion. These films are very different than the musicals of Altman's corpus, in which male/female co-stars are comparably famous actors and have equally significant roles within the film, such as Jeanette MacDonald and Maurice Chevalier in *The Merry Widow* (1934) or John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John in *Grease* (1978). The musical biopic couple in *Buddy* cannot be easily drawn into a comparison with these other duos of equal-footing. Maria is nowhere to be found in the first half-hour of the film, and is played by Maria Richwine, a lesser known performer than Gary Busey. Yet, in his description of the musical biopic, which does not receive much attention in *The American Film Musical*, Altman does not draw any strong distinctions between the musical biopic and the broader genre of the musical. Rather, he argues that musical biopics readily absorb "the syntax of the show musical," equating success in business with success in love: "Music must never be seen as something one does solely to make a living. To make music is to make love; to make love is to inspire art."<sup>31</sup> In musical biopics of the 1970s through the 90s, music figures more as an obstacle to love instead of a means to its certain attainment.

In *Buddy*, emphasis on business and performance is elevated over romance, and fulfillment in love is often positioned as antithetic to professional achievement. At one point, when Buddy wishes (against his manager's will) to take a break from touring, his wife urges him to continue. Buddy, exasperatedly, replies, "Oh boy, this record business. I've got it all around me." Consider how different this set-up is compared to Altman's description of the musical biopic in which musical performance facilitates romantic coupling. In *Buddy*, in sharp contrast to this ideal, the performer is exasperated by the way that his musical career impedes love, with how his career has professionalizes his personal relationship.

*Buddy* is also notable as the first musical biopic in which the lead actor does not lip-synch, but practiced, recorded, and performed his own version on the star musician's songs. While, as in nearly all biopics, his romantic life is explored, its importance pales in comparison to the spectacle of performance, both of Buddy's career, and Busey's attempted imitation of his songs. Thus, Buddy's narrative can be placed somewhere in the middle of Altman's delimitation of the dual- versus the single- focus narrative. It is, indeed, impossible to imagine the film without Maria, who fulfills what is, in many ways, a typical function in the musical biopic—supplying a personal back story that normalizes the transcendent star and a point of empathy to make the sacrifice of stardom greater and his eventual death even more tragic. At the same time, though, the single-focus attraction remains, as the star-singer is the undeniable center of the film—the picture's reason for existence.

While Altman accurately notes the balance between lead protagonists in films such as *The Merry Widow*, which do fit the description of the dual focus

film, his absorption of the musical biopic into this scheme is less convincing. *The Great Caruso* (1951), which Altman cites as a paradigmatic example of the musical biopic, consistently espouses a “notion of music as dependent on a fusion of [romantic] opposites.” In the classical musical biopic, the lead’s “profession is dependent upon a celebration of his romantic ties. Music is no longer just a job or talent, it is an artistic consecration of the marriage vows.”<sup>32</sup> Music serves no such function in *The Buddy Holly Story*, where songs are never carefully integrated with the plot, and the star’s pairing with his love interest is the product of a chance meeting at work more than something specially enabled by the performance of one song or another at a particularly opportune plot-point. Nevertheless, though Buddy’s music never produces the effects of Tony’s “Maria” or Gaston’s “Gigi,” his successful *work* in music still coincides with his meeting the love of his life, which qualifies the film as a dual-focus narrative.

The case of the musical biopic—illustrated here with *The Buddy Holly Story*—shows how this genre works against Altman’s schematic opposition of the musical, by way of the dual focus narrative, and other Hollywood genres. This film is able to both illustrate a linear progression of the hero’s rise to fame, but also his replacement of the wrong girl with the right one. Altman provides a more fully fleshed out discussion of the “dual-focus system” in *A Theory of Narrative*:

In the dual-focus system, where the end is by and large known from the start, the process of reading takes on the character of ritual repetition, with each segment of the text recalling familiar legal, moral, and economic codes. Single-focus readers, quite to the contrary, are forever projected forward toward an unknown or, rather, toward one more in a long series of unknowns.<sup>33</sup>

Here, again, the musical biopic places these two falsely opposed narratives, alongside one another. The representation of both a single (the famous career) and dual (the stable love relationship) focus narrative—far from an incoherent or impossible proposition—generates the film’s central problem. In this case, the ending is known, yet Holly and Maria are, decidedly, not equally important characters. (As I will cover later—in reference to *Sid and Nancy* and as the central topic of Chapter Four—Altman is correct to identify a “ritual repetition” at work in this genre. Yet, where the “ritual repetition” of romantic coupling dominantly defines the musical, the “death drive” of the celebrity is the more salient “ritual repetition” structuring the post-classical musical biopic.)

Even more than the dual-focus narrative, the backstage musical figures as a relevant subgenre to the musical biopic—with the obvious parallel of the double-sided story, where we see not only stage performances, but the effort put into their preparation off-stage and the drama in the lives of individual performers. Here, too, *The Buddy Holly Story* (and other musical biopics of this time period) figure into this tradition half-way, evincing some aspects of heritage from the backstage musical, while significantly varying from this form in other ways.

It may come as some surprise that the backstage musical, the subgenre apparently most tied to the stage, is characterized by its very attempt to transcend it. According to the work of both James Collins and Jane Feuer, the films that have come to define the backstage musical—Busby Berkeley’s 1930s films—consistently move from the stage to a “completely cinematic space.”<sup>34</sup> Jane Feuer writes that “Extended musical sequences . . . start within a proscenium frame and then become fully edited filmic sequences, in a tradition

stemming from the early Berkeley musicals.”<sup>35</sup> Collins evaluates the comparative emphasis placed on liveness versus film in *Footlight Parade*. Here, he writes, Cagney plays a musical director who devises the idea of live musical preludes to films,

but the emphasis on ‘live’ entertainment is more thoroughly worked out in the ‘backstage’ conceit pervading the film. Cagney constantly makes and remakes numbers so that each one appears to be in the process of creation. In the last section we see the finished product, but at this point a fascinating series of contradictions arise. While the rehearsals leading up to this grand finale are all clearly situated on a theatrical stage, the finished numbers are constructed around a cinematic use of space.<sup>36</sup>

*The Buddy Holly Story*, at the same time that it can be discussed within the vein of film-musical traditions, exemplifies a number of characteristics that situate the film in terms of New Hollywood—an era of filmmaking largely defined by its opposition to the romance of classical Hollywood cinema, as disenchanted, spare, and critically engaged. Gittler’s film can be accounted for just as plausibly with this framework in mind, as *The Buddy Holly Story* emphasizes the business of music making—particularly elements that portray the business as onerous and unexciting—beyond what is strictly necessary for this to qualify as a backstage musical. The film also features a stripped-down aesthetic characteristic of lower-budget films in this era.

While *The Buddy Holly Story* is not without its charms—*The Washington Post* is correct to cite performance as film’s central attraction—its visual style is restricted and efficient. The economical quality of the picture’s visual design matches both its low budget and the film’s expected after-life on television. A close analysis of the final scene in the film, a medley of songs performed just

hours before his death underscores the restrained style of the film. In this, what could be a much more triumphant, emphatic final performance, a very direct, unexceptional series of shots captures his final performance.

As Holly walks onto stage, he is captured by a mobile tracking shot that follows him across stage. A long shot shows the backstage perspective, before we settled on a medium shot, which awkwardly cuts Holly from the waist-up. A slow-moving crane or dolly shot slowly completes a semi-circle around the stage, before we move to a medium close-up of Holly. These tracking shots move simply and deliberately, tracking in-out, or around the performer. At one point, a stage light shines directly into the camera and, later, the heads of audience members obstruct the camera's view of the stage. With the exception of only two shots (one from backstage and another long-shot that captures the entire stage and audience) the entirety of Buddy's final performance is captured from only two camera angles-- an aesthetic style that simulates a live television performance (which is also restricted to just two or three cameras at time).

The manner in which Holly's final performance is portrayed is notable for its low-key, restrained quality. Though the singer makes his way through a number of his hit songs—"True Love Ways," "That'll Be the Day," "Oh Boy," "Peggy Sue," "Maybe Baby," and "Not Fade Away"—the simple, straightforward visual design of this scene contrasts with what we know to be such an important scene in rock history. If the muted visual design of this sequence is difficult to account for given that we know this to be a momentous occasion, it can be accounted for as an effort to capture the "live" quality of a rock performance. 'Imperfect' shots, with audience members obscuring our point of the view, or with lights shining directly into the camera work in this

respect: the unadorned style of cinematography suggests the necessity of having to record a live performance in just one, original instance. Thus, such simple, economic modes of cinematography register as an 'authentic' style, which refuses to make the final performance too glossy, or imbued with the knowledge of soon-to-be-tragic story. In this way, the film works against the tendency of musical biopics to be overly-predictable: it is as if the videographers at the Clear Lake performance did not anticipate that this performance was any more distinctive than other Holly performances.<sup>37</sup> The depiction of Holly's final concert as just another performance could, potentially, disappoint viewers. Yet, this representation works by suggesting that any live performance from Holly is powerful enough without unnecessary visual flourishes.

While the plethora of material supplied by off-stage events constitute an essential part of this subgenre, we cannot lose sight of the centrality of the powerful on-stage performance to the backstage musical and the musical biopic. Though the efficacy of the backstage musical greatly depends on the premise that there is more to the show than what appears on-stage, this subgenre works, ultimately, to sell on us the conviction of the performance. This authenticity can be conveyed via artistic devotion or romantic congruence, as songs performed on stage are paralleled by the off-screen love lives of performers. At the least, on-stage performances convey a passion that is the result of tireless sacrifice in service of their vocation and the lead's ceaseless belief in the power of their craft.

When films in this subgenre work effectively, the charisma of these performers are central to the film's appeal. Consider this review of *The Buddy Holly Story* in *The Washington Post*:

At his most riveting, Busey seems to be in the grip of a transporting musical passion. His eyes bulge and his face contorts in ways that suggest something more than artful impressions of another entertainer. Far from being Holly tics consciously inserted, these expressions appear spontaneous. It's as if Busey's immersion in the music were bringing him to the verge of ecstasy or collapse . . . It's a moving experience to see an actor engaged this intensely by his work. While he never loses control, he occasionally seems to teeter on the brink. He's got the passion, and it could consume him as easily as it could fulfill him.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, even as the spontaneity of music is portrayed in more realistic contexts, without any explicit link to the romantic narrative, the stage remains a forum for “transporting musical passion.” In this way, *The Buddy Holly Story* retains the centrality of performance that is so central to the Hollywood musical while also situating the same within a circumscribed environment that spectators are able to accept as realistic performance by an exceptionally talented performer—at the level of the original performer and the actor’s work to imitate or otherwise convey their charisma.

*The Buddy Holly Story* expanded cinematic performances of pop stars to include, by default, not only acting as a popular singer, but performing their songs as well. This was, in fact, the first film in which the lead actor not only played a popular singer, but did his own singing in the lead role. As *The USA Today* reports, “Some surviving members of The Crickets, Holly's old band, carped, but others found Busey (a former member of major-label '70s band Carp) energetic and charismatic, and the film helped kick-start a trend of films focusing on pop-music icons.”<sup>39</sup> In her negative review of the soundtrack album, Eve Zibart, who had yet to see the film, notes that “Busey has been receiving



favorable reviews from film critics, so his acting must be more convincing than his singing."<sup>40</sup> Zibart misses the point to separate the performance on the soundtrack album from the film. The central purpose of this stunt is not to produce an album of comparable quality to the film, but to underscore how the lead's expanded performance— selling the performance of the lead character in a musical biopic as one of the most difficult film roles. The actor who succeeds in this remarkably difficult feat (to do their own singing) potentially yields Academy Awards, as Sissy Spacek did in her performance of Loretta Lynn in *Coal Miner's Daughter*.

### **Numbers and Narrative in the Contemporary Musical Biopic II: *Coal Miner's Daughter***

We can continue to gauge the similarity or dissimilarity of the musical biopic to the classical Hollywood musical by attending to the next significant work in this genre, *Coal Miner's Daughter*. This film, which many still regard as the strongest example in the history of the musical biopic, tells the story of Loretta Lynn's rise from a Kentucky hillbilly to the "first lady of country music."<sup>41</sup> Typical of a women's biopic, the film places particular emphasis on, not only the lead's relationship to her partner, but to her children as well.<sup>42</sup> Like *The Buddy Holly Story*, *Coal Miner's Daughter* portrays the life of the musical star and their famed repertoire as part of a story structured around (A) a dual-focus narrative, (B) a shifting emphases between the stage and backstage, and (C) a relatively arbitrary integration of the numbers with the plot.

*Coal Miner's Daughter* also continues the trend—in fact, to much greater success—that the lead performers not only act, but learn how to sing all the pop singers tunes. As Loretta Lynn recalled in her second autobiography:

[I] didn't know Sissy was fixin' to work me to death! She went to the studio where Owen Bradley had produced so many of my hits and learned to sing the songs the way I sing them, too. After we worked together for a good while, we went on the Opry and traded off verses of 'Fist City.' Most of the Opry regulars standing backstage couldn't tell who was singin' what. Owen also produced Sissy on the movie's soundtrack, and there was only one song on the album that I didn't think sounded as much like me. That song was "Coal Miner's Daughter," and it wasn't quite as good as the rest of them, even though she tried real hard on it. But as far as I'm concerned, she done a great job.<sup>43</sup>

Lynn's positive review of Spacek's performance is revealing, as the feature film would prove to be an effective, cross-promotional text for both women.<sup>44</sup> *Still Woman Enough*, Lynn's second autobiography, includes a telling anecdote from the perspective of her teenage daughter: "Peggy says their lives was pretty normal until 1980, when *Coal Miner's Daughter* was being made. One of the first things that happened was when kids at school started 'a buzzing about who was staying out at our house. Carrie!'"<sup>45</sup> By both endorsing Spacek's performance of her songs, and finding humor in fans fully associating actors with their roles, Lynn embraces a mediated, inauthentic version of the performing self consistent with the expectation that the contemporary pop star appear in a variety of forms and guises—in print, on television, on record, and on film.

Like *The Buddy Holly Story*, *Coal Miner's Daughter* consciously eschews an "integrative" style which draws explicit emotional or thematic links between the life-story of the performer and her songs. The film strikes a fine rhetorical

balance in foregrounding Lynn's rural roots as legitimating the authenticity of her work while also acknowledging, in effect, the splintering psychological effect of spreading oneself out so fully across a variety of media (radio, photographs, records) and a wide range of live appearances (at a state fair, on her own tour, on radio spots, and at the Grand Ole Opry). *The Washington Post* evaluated *Coal Miner's Daughter* as "one of the straightest biographical narratives ever distilled for the screen," describing the film as "basically a survival story," which eschews "customary overdramatization" or "shameless sentimentality."<sup>46</sup> Though the reviewers failed to explicitly note the loose association between numbers and narrative, this representational shift played a central role in generating the film's realism.

In her survey of films of the late 70s and early 80s, such as Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz* (1979), Jane Feuer describes the weekend association between narratives and numbers as broadly characteristic of musicals in this era. Trying to explain the prominence of the "back-stage" genre at this time, Feuer writes: "Perhaps these 'art' musicals fulfilled a need for verisimilitude; perhaps the audience felt more comfortable viewing musical numbers within in the context of a show."<sup>47</sup> While, as the *Post* review (which celebrates the economy and simplicity of *Coal Miner's Daughter*) implies, musical biopics are clearly not "art" musicals, Feuer's observation of the demystifying/backstage tendency of "art" musicals also applies the musical biopics of the 1970s and 80s, which moved more towards a 'realistic' representation of the performer's life.

Babington and Evans also note a move away from integrative numbers in the post-classical musical. They attributed this textual shift to producers' suspicions that audiences might no longer accept "the convention that people

sing their feelings."<sup>48</sup> As a result, in the new musical "it was not necessary for the numbers to have an especially complex relationship with the narrative material."<sup>49</sup> Yet, such readings of the new musical miss the way that numbers in *Coal Miner's Daughter* can be used as "counterpoint," expressing the distance between the content of the songs and the state of the star performer. For instance, a medley of songs, all about protecting the nuclear family is ironically placed against a montage of scenes illustrating Lynn's isolation, loneliness, and distance from her own family. Portions of songs from "Fist City," "Squaw's on the Warpath," and so on, play while Loretta shuffles, fatigued, through barren hotel corridors and lays, forlorn and bored, in her hotel room watching television.

The decidedly downbeat, 'realistic' tendency of *Coal Miner's Daughter* is tellingly represented in the scene in which Lynn has a breakdown onstage and is unable to perform for her adoring audience. Though Lynn is headachy and disoriented, and musical performance is the last thing she would impulsively perform, her husband, always the promoter and business associate in addition to spouse, orders her to "get the hell out there and sing for the folks." As Lynn woozily makes her way to the stage, a tracking shot is, appropriately, titled downward, following the footlights to the stage, effectively simulating Lynn's point of view, simply searching for the ground and making an effort to put one foot in front of the other. By the time Lynn does make it onstage, it is clear that it was a bad idea to have her perform in this state—she forgets the words to her hit songs, rambles semi-coherently, and faints.

The disorienting tracking shot that precedes her failed performance could suitably be described, in Jane Feuer's terms, as a "demystifying" shot. However,

in Feuer's analysis, every "demystifying" move—even in the bleakest of 70s and 80s musicals—must be redeemed by a counterbalancing "remystifying" effect which effectively trumps the reflexive tendency of the film and reinstates the magic of performance, music, and, by extension, Hollywood. She writes,

The demystifying shot is never used alone, however. It is always cut in with shots from the point of view of the theatrical audience, shots which mystify the performance. One can speak of a patter of demystification and remystification operating in the filming of onstage numbers in backstage musicals.<sup>50</sup>

Here, I take the liberty to include *any* narrative event or filmic effect which is "demystifying" for consideration. In this instance, the disillusioning, tragic elements of Lynn's life story are never fully reabsorbed or neutralized by a resolution that restores harmony in the couple. Where Babington and Evans negatively evaluate, as a whole, the tendency of contemporary musicals to eschew the integration of musical numbers, *Coal Miner's Daughter's* pessimism—far from a symptom of "no imaginative grasp of convention" by the production staff—displays its knowledge of convention in breaking so significantly and effectively from the dominant trends of both musicals and musical biopics.<sup>51</sup>

In films such as *Coal Miner's Daughter* and *The Buddy Holly Story*, the narrative content of the star's songs is incidental next to the pressing, material imperative that the singer continue to perform them. The stark mismatch between the tone and content of the numbers versus the narrative is often evident. For instance, in *The Buddy Holly Story*, the band plays a rousing rendition of "Maybe Baby" in the midst of the Crickets' falling out and separation. The central dramatic interest of such films is the tension between the performer's attempt to sustain a professional and a private life. As Cynthia Hanson notes of

these films: “the entertainer’s public success has been juxtaposed with private struggles.”<sup>52</sup> The Loretta Lynn song, “Success has made a failure of our home” succinctly summarizes the narrative thrust of the musical biopic.<sup>53</sup> By contrast, the classical Hollywood musical has, traditionally, situated songs in completely the opposite manner—as moments where protagonists are most inspired and most free to make decisions. Elsaesser writes: “It is precisely when . . . emotional intensity becomes too strong to bear that [the performer] has to dance and sing in order to give free play to the emotions that possess them.”<sup>54</sup> Consider this characterization in contrast to Lynn’s description (very similar in tone to the film) of musical performance in her autobiography. Here, Lynn describes how singing the same hit songs again and again can, indeed, be a draining, drudgerous process—in short, work: “It’s always the same songs, and sometimes people ask me if I get tired of singing ‘em. Yes, I do. At first it’s good, but you go for years and you really get tired of ‘em. But people want to hear your hit songs, so you’ve got to.”<sup>55</sup>

Musical biopics of the late 70s and early 80s often emphasize the musical *career* in opposition to the tendency of the classical Hollywood musical to weight artistic passion and expression. The musical biopic functions dramatically because of what it deprives the central character from, not what it enables them to express. In *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, the central conflict between the singer/songwriter Loretta Lynn (Sissy Spacek) and her husband Doolittle (Tommy Lee Jones) intensifies as the demands of Loretta’s professional schedule lead him to become increasingly jealous and unfaithful. Her music, here, becomes an obligation and a strain on her relationship with Doolittle. The deferral of romance in *Selena* is another example of this tendency. In a significant

shot, the precociously successful singer, boarding her tour bus, glances wistfully at a happy, anonymous couple necking on a park bench. The enormous cost of work and fame is the major point of emphasis in these pictures. Cynthia Rose writes that rock biopics consistently rely on “some mixture of three formats: the struggle, the price exacted and/or the tragic fate.”<sup>56</sup> The content of the performer’s music becomes a side point next to their life-struggle story. With music positioned as a obligation that creates conflict, certain lyrics are sung to fulfill a contract, not because the character identifies with their content at the time of performance.

When the content of the performer’s songs is, in fact, treated as expressive rather than compulsory, the difficult process of songwriting is emphasized. For example, in *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, the title-track, which could have been used to fully introduce the lead character, is not performed until the film’s conclusion. This fits the film’s tendency to situate songwriting as a difficult, lengthy process, not spontaneous expression. This placement of the song emphasizes the work involved in the production of popular music. We also see Loretta writing “You Ain’t Woman Enough (To Take My Man)” well after she catches her husband cheating. Thus, the film includes a ‘realistic’ gap between the occurrence of an event and her later, hesitant composition of a song inspired by it. Here, the spontaneity of the musical is sacrificed in favor of a more faithful depiction of touring and songwriting as labor. Significantly, in Lynn’s autobiography, *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, which is credited as the source material for the film, the singer explicitly discusses the composition of “You Ain’t Woman Enough (To Take My Man),” pointing out that this song had *absolutely nothing* to do with her personal life; it was a piece of entertainment written for fans to identify with.<sup>57</sup> The

composition of Lynn's first hit song "Honky Tonk Girl" is also tellingly portrayed. This, Loretta's first composition, is composed haltingly, with Spacek intentionally hitting uncertain notes. Avoiding the montage of hit-songs that is more typical of the musical biopic, we listen to almost all of more of this song, *four times*—as it was the first tune that Lynn ever penned—before she moves on to her other songs. The content of the song, about an alcoholic woman who loses her lover bears little resemblance to Lynn's life as represented by the film. Again, music *does not* function as a medium for personal, immediate expression, but as entertainment crafted for a mass audience.

Where musical biopics of the 1970s and 80s are truer to the work involved in the production of music than the energy contained within it, recent such films (*Ray*, *Walk the Line*, and *Beyond the Sea*) are more invested in the structure of music from 'musicals'. In *Ray*, intensified continuity editing enables the film to work, at once, with the structure of the musical and the content of a biopic. Music as a spontaneous emotional expression is drawn from the musical while the more 'realistic' deployment of singing and performance (usually on stage or in recording studios and always by professionals) is drawn from the biopic. These recent films did not, all of sudden, wholly shift the structure of the musical biopic. Previous films in this genre have worked like musicals less fully, and in certain moments.

In 1977, Richard Dyer wrote that "Musicals represent an extraordinary mix of these two modes—the historicity of the narrative and the lyricism of numbers. They have not often taken advantage of it, but the point is that they could, and that this possibility is always latent in them."<sup>58</sup> This recent cycle of musical biographies approaches this potential, but from the opposite direction.



While Dyer emphasizes “historicity” as a neglected area of attention in the classical musical—often inappropriately simply as ‘pure entertainment’—in terms of the biopic, “the lyricism of numbers” is the less commonly satisfied expectation.<sup>59</sup> I argue, in agreement with Telotte, that earlier rock biopics, such as *The Buddy Holly Story* and *Coal Miner’s Daughter* sacrifice the spontaneity of the musical in favor of a more faithful depiction of touring and songwriting as labor.

The ambivalence of *Coal Miner’s Daughter* is also expressed in its dual-focus narrative. At first blush, the film appears to perfectly resemble Babington and Evans’s short summation of the backstage musical’s typical inclusion of a romantic narrative whose success dovetails with a similarly idealized stage production.<sup>60</sup> As depicted in *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, the star singer’s relationship to her husband, Doolittle, is equally significant to her musical career. As is often the case in the musical biopic—even more so when the performer is a woman, it is impossible to imagine her career apart from his partnership and management. Here, it is Doolittle who recognizes Loretta’s musical ability and pushes her to pursue a professional career. Every step in establishing her as a professional—recording and pressing a demo, taking a promotional photo, scheduling every gig available, and soliciting local radio stations—is achieved at Doolittle’s urging. While her husband’s enthusiasm and belief in Loretta’s talents is flattering, as in prior musical biopics (see *Love Me or Leave Me* [1955]), the self-effacement necessary to work exclusively backstage proves to be too emasculating for the husband/manager. This conflict comes to a fore in a scene with Patsy Cline and her husband, in which the female stars (playfully, they think) joke that their husbands are catching a free ride. Doolittle, eventually, carouses with other women, verges on alcoholism, and verbally abuses Loretta. Fitting Dennis

Bingham's observation about biopics starring female subjects, losses in the assumed priorities of "home, marriage, and motherhood," often are persistently emphasized alongside Lynn's achievements.<sup>61</sup> Still, this being a Hollywood film and, further, a biopic, *Coal Miner's Daughter* ends as expected, happily and successfully. The couple resolves their conflicts and finds a tract of land on which to build a new home—which is obviously symbolic of beginning a new, more equitable phase of their relationship.

Nevertheless, the ending of *Coal Miner's Daughter* stands out as an exceptionally neat and simple ending to what was a troublesome (if not downright disturbing) relationship for the majority of the film. This reading was reinforced in my course on the musical biopic when (without any prompting toward this conclusion) numerous students—women in particular—were uneasy with the film's resolution. Instead of accepting the film's end, the abusive relationship left the lasting impression on many students. This mode of reading in which the bulk, middle portion of the film is emphasized more than the conclusion, is in fact a well established practice in film studies. Just as Doolittle's abusive treatment of Loretta throughout *Coal Miner's Daughter* exceeds the more bucolic introduction and conclusion to the film, Janey Place urges us to downplay the ending of the film noir *Gilda* (1946), in which Rita Hayworth's hitherto defiant protagonist is finally suppressed, and put in her place. Place argues that we should not give much weight to this tacked-on reversal, that, ultimately "The image of Gilda we remember" is the defiant one.<sup>62</sup> Here, too, one could argue that the picture of Loretta's marriage we remember is the dysfunctional, abusive one, not the neat resolution at the film's conclusion. Even for viewers who believe that Doolittle and Loretta have an acceptably

contentious relationship, their brand of love remains rough around the edges, a “country” variation on the subject, atypically cinematic and, more specifically, atypical to the musical biopic. The relationship at the center of *Coal Miner’s Daughter* remains awfully far from Babington and Evans’s description of “performers [who] meet and love in that metaphoric equivalent of perfect performing and perfect relationship that is so common in the musical.”<sup>63</sup>

The fact that *Coal Miner’s Daughter* is a “country” musical biopic provides another effective way of understanding both the nature of its dual-focus narrative (discussed above) and its treatment of the songs in relation to the narrative.<sup>64</sup> In the short view, like *The Buddy Holly Story*, *Coal Miner’s Daughter* strictly avoids the integration of musical numbers with the narrative. Examining the content of Lynn’s songs in terms of place (instead of personal relationships) produces a far more integrated picture of the story and soundtrack. When Doolittle tells Loretta to “get the hell out there and sing for the folks,” this highlights the disconnect between the sentiment of her songs, her immediate emotional state, and her romantic relationship. Music, here, appears to only function as simply craft and labor. A broader view of the film—informed by work on the Hollywood musical—illustrates an alternate way that Loretta’s songs are integrated with the film. Here, Doolittle’s demand that Loretta “sing for the *folks*” is particularly significant, as, if *Coal Miner’s Daughter* breaks from the tradition of songs as immediate emotional expression, it can be connected to the film tradition of the “folk musical.”

In his survey of classical Hollywood musicals, James Collins explicitly contrasts this subgenre with the “backstage musical.” According to Collins, folk musicals such as *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *Oklahoma* “depart from the backstage

tradition by using music and dances indigenous to a particular temporal or geographical setting."<sup>65</sup> Here, as is often the case with country music, there is a direct link between Lynn's repertoire, her audience, and her heritage. Her performance for "the folks," is a collective affirmation of their shared identity.

The instrumentation of the title-track, "Coal Miner's Daughter" also illustrates the way that her songs association with place provide a kind of integration between the songs and the setting of the film. "Coal Miner's Daughter," which remains Lynn's biggest hit, is a clearly autobiographical song on which the film is titled and based. For even the casual Lynn fan, narrative events in the film are recognizably lifted from the title song:

"Coal Miner's Daughter" (Loretta Lynn)

In the summertime we didn't have shoes to wear,  
But in the wintertime we'd all get a brand new pair . . .

Well, I was born a coal miner's daughter,  
in a cabin on a hill in Butcher Holler.  
We were poor, but we had love,  
That's the one thing that daddy made sure of.  
He shoveled coal to make a poor man's dollar . . .

Well, a lot of things have changed since way back then.

This song is not performed until the end of the picture, working in summary, not as an instantaneous expression. Yet, an instrumental version of the song, without lyrics, plays over numerous early scenes in her rural-hometown, underscoring the spatial connection between the song and rural heritage.

The tie between Lynn's repertoire provides a counterbalance to the more pessimistic portrayal of married life and stardom. At the same time, the folk musical also tends toward the romanticism also associated with the classical backstage musical. Feuer writes that the folk musical "offers a vision of musical

performance originating in the folk, generating love and cooperative spirit that includes everyone in its grasp and that can conquer all obstacles.”<sup>66</sup> While the “folk”-connection provides a measure of redemption for the downer-tendencies of the film (it still exemplifies Feuer’s description of the musical as “a mass art that aspires to the condition of a folk art”), the agentic power of music—on an individual or communal level—remains significantly limited. In this respect, *Coal Miner’s Daughter* remains a more pessimistic, more qualified version of the folk musical than its classical precedents. Here, music retains its power as human expression and as a collective ritual, but its ability to broadly transform the lives of its performers or audiences for the better has been thoroughly repudiated.

Looking primarily at *The Great Ziegfeld* and *The Great Caruso*, which he cites as a paradigmatic example of the musical biopic, Rick Altman writes that this genre consistently espouses a “notion of music as dependent on a fusion of opposites,” as the lead’s “profession is dependent upon a celebration of his romantic ties. Music is no longer just a job or talent, it is an artistic consecration of the marriage vows.”<sup>67</sup> Such romantic associations with music-making are rejected in *Coal Miner’s Daughter* and *The Buddy Holly Story*. In these cases, the lead subjects still try their best to live and love while also pursuing a musical career, but their musical commitments often inhibit the formation of these relationships. Thus, the primary characteristic of the musical biopic in the classical era—the correlation of musical performance with romantic success—was rejected by post-70s iterations of the genre.

### ***Sid and Nancy: Dysfunctional Couple, Disintegrated Numbers***

The most important musical biopic of the mid-80s stretches this reversal to the furthest extent—portraying the most hellacious musical career (or after-effect of one) ever put on film. *Sid and Nancy* (1986) details the life of Sid Vicious (Gary Oldham), bass player of the legendary British punk band The Sex Pistols *after* the band's break-up. Nancy Spungen (Chloe Webb), a groupie who became Sid's companion is the co-star of the film. While the film's reason for being, it often appears, is to directly take on the established conventions of the musical biopic, *Sid and Nancy* can still effectively be understood as an inverted romantic musical biopic. Like most films in the genre, *Sid and Nancy* remains a dual-focus narrative, albeit a dystopic, dysfunctional one. Sid, clearly more a punk icon than talented musician, attempts a series of ill-fated, half-hearted comeback attempts.<sup>68</sup> In the film's most typical scenes, Sid languishes with Nancy as they, heavy drinkers and drug addicts, live day to day in semicoherent states of inebriation. This culminates, at last, in a murder and overdose.

In clear ways, *Sid and Nancy* is very different than many musical biopics: the short time-period of the film, which tracks the ill-fated couple over just a year or so, not the entire sweep of their lives, distinguishes the film. It is easy to imagine a more conventional Sid Vicious biopic which includes plot points left as blind spots in *Sid and Nancy*: his adoration of the Sex Pistols as a fan, their first meeting, the peak of their success, and the band's breakup. All of these plot-points are conventionally more significant events than the seemingly endless stupor that Sid and Nancy live in for the duration of the film.

*Sid and Nancy's* foregrounding of failure in place of success (in both romantic and professional arenas) differentiates the film as both a musical and a biopic. In his study of the biopic, Custen notes that protagonists typically experience "fortune and misfortune." The scales have shifted considerably here—the more "fortunate" chapters of Sid's life occur before the film and neither his music nor Nancy's company save them from "misfortune."<sup>69</sup> Musical biopics have traditionally presented artistic expression as an aid to the musician's search for love and happiness.

In John C. Tibbetts's analysis of both European and American examples of classical composer biopics—the Schumann films *Song of Love* (1947) and *Traumerei* (1944)—he finds that the films usually present an individual "who will conquer *through his music* many trials and obstacles."<sup>70</sup> *Sid and Nancy*, oppositely, positions music as unromantic. Music, here, is practiced by diminished and flawed individuals, not the aggrandized subjects of the classical era. This rejection of the bourgeoisie subject matches the broader project of the punk subculture.

As Angela McRobbie and Simon Frith explain, punk was as much committed to a subversion of dominant values as the development of a particular musical aesthetic. They write,

Punk involved an attack on both romantic and permissive social conventions . . . in their refusal to let their sexuality be constructed as a commodity some punks went as far as to deny their sexuality any significance at all . . . 'What is sex anyway?' asked Johnny Rotten, 'Just thirty seconds of squelching noises'. Punk was the first form of rock not to rest on love songs . . . The historical problem is to explain their commercial success, to account for the punks' interruption of the long-standing rock equation of sex and pleasure.<sup>71</sup>

This is a question we can extend to *Sid and Nancy's* audience. Film theorists position pleasure as the dominant affect offered by popular cinema. This feeling is typically delivered by the romantic plot. As Hollywood genres, the musical and the biopic follow this tendency: romantic coupling is their default narrative resolution. In place of these dominant tendencies, *Sid and Nancy* portrays dysfunctional coupling and self-destruction. Its affect is masochistic, based more on suffering than pleasure. The film's director, Alex Cox, described the difficulty of pitching this film. As he recalled, "The majority of studios we approached said 'Nobody wants to see this film. These characters are horrible. They're repulsive and you are happy when they are dead.'" <sup>72</sup> This underscores the film's dissimilarity with most biopics.

*Sid and Nancy*, potentially alienating characters, appear in what has historically been a hagiographic genre. Accounting for this tendency, Custen contextualizes the classical biopic (which features exemplary, great individuals) with print biographies of previous centuries: "In particular, biographies, like the earlier "Lives of Saints," helped prepare average people to accept their place in the social structure by valorizing a common, distant, and elevated set of lives that readers could hope to emulate." <sup>73</sup> As the biopic evolved, as noted by Glenn D. Smith Jr., the genre increasingly depicted protagonists with serious problems. Yet, these troubled individuals still sought redemption and a typical family life. As Carolyn Anderson and Jonathan Lupo observe, recent biopics which emphasize the insufficient aspects of their leads typically play off the tension between the greatness of their public achievements and the insufficiency in their private lives: "A major trope among these biopics of artists is the contradiction



between the individual who is a great artist but a lousy person, treating friends, family, and lovers incorrigibly."<sup>74</sup> *Sid and Nancy*'s presentation of limited lead subjects pushes the genre's more recent tendency to depict the marginally likeable even further. Sid's scant and amateurish output does not obviously justify the costs of his reckless living. With unappealing, questionably talented protagonists uninterested in reform or redemption, all the basic ingredients of the classical biopic character appear to be rejected by *Sid and Nancy*.

Still, even here, in what appears to be a thoroughly antagonistic take on the genre, we can recognize numerous ways in which *Sid and Nancy* remains invested in the basic structure of the musical biopic. For every stylistic element that works to pare down or critique this genre, we can point to other strategies that place the film more firmly in line with musical biopic conventions. For one, the relationship between Sid and Nancy makes the film a dual-focus narrative of its own kind—except, in this case, it is not the pairing of an idealized performer with an idealized relationship, but the exact opposite: utter dysfunction defines both the professional and the private life.<sup>75</sup> In this way, *Sid and Nancy* can be regarded as an inverted dual-focus narrative.

The film's working title—*Love Kills*—underscores the centrality of the ill-fated relationship to the film's design. In an interview, the film's director discusses his decision to focus on this disastrous couple instead of the Sex Pistols. Cox said,

*Sid and Nancy* are this great pair of doomed lovers, which is a much more interesting thing to make a film about than The Sex Pistols. *Sid and Nancy* is much more of a love story, a romance. In love there is so much of tripping your partner out, laying traps for them, and putting them in difficult situations to test them. There's an awful lot of very strange and insane

stuff attendant to being in love. Two people who are so much in love destroy each other.<sup>76</sup>

Brian Michael Goss notes how *Sid and Nancy* cites and revises cinematic conventions in a scene which dramatizes a conventional kiss scene. Here,

Even iconography that is borrowed from Hollywood cliché—for example, the romantic kiss in the rain . . . is given an original, stylistic edge in *Sid and Nancy*. A shot of the couple beginning to kiss in bed cuts to a graphically matched long shot of the clinched couple silhouetted in a dark alley. As Sid leans against a dumpster and Nancy embraces him from the front, trash swirls around them . . . a witty parody of the standard-issue imagery.<sup>77</sup>

Goss also notes how music is used, in “counterpoint” to the image, with a “haunting” motif in place of the expected “swelling triumphal music.”<sup>78</sup> What Goss misses is that a less astute and more romantically inclined audience member can, at this moment, ignore such revisions. While a more knowing spectator may identify with the irony of this moment, more naïve viewers can hold the archetype of the perfect couple in clearer focus. Similar to *Cadillac Records*, *Sid and Nancy* caters to both audiences. Thomas Elsaesser describes this “split mode of address” as a characteristic of post-classical cinema.<sup>79</sup>

In other instances, Goss accurately notes how shades of convention persist in the face of significant variations on the genre. Citing the reaction of Sex Pistols frontman Johnny Lydon/Rotten to the film, Goss illustrates how *Sid and Nancy*'s writers and directors took considerable fictional license—often surprisingly conventional ones, for this to work as a feature film. For instance, the film plays up the closeness of Sid and Johnny's relationship, and implies that the singer envied their relationship. At the time, in fact, “Lydon was romantically involved with his wife-to-be . . . [and] considered the insinuations of sexual jealousy

surrounding Sid and Nancy's romantic pairing to be a 'slur.'" Additionally, in a way that anticipates the "Hit the Road Jack" scene in *Ray*—point of view shots in live concerts imply a degree of personal interaction in these forums that was doubtfully present at the event. In this instance, "during the San Francisco show, Johnny Rotten's last words on stage as a Sex Pistol—"Ever get the feeling that you're being cheated?"—were directed at McLaren, the band, and the audience (i.e., the whole Sex Pistols experience). In the film, he is plainly glaring at Sid after he caustically delivers the line."<sup>80</sup>

While Goss aptly points to some conventional tendencies of *Sid and Nancy*, other critics have misinterpreted some of its dominant characteristics of the film for "punk" innovations. For instance, Jon Laderman emphasizes how *Sid and Nancy* pushes against the unity of the sound and image track; often "the punk performer "slips" out of sync with the soundtrack and/or spectacle context, engendering a provocative moment of tension."<sup>81</sup> Yet, the film's tendency to "slip-sync," as Laderman puts it, is mitigated by the fact that the *Sid and Nancy* continues the trend of star actors performing the film's songs. The rejection of lip-synching (as opposed to "slip-sync" sequences) works to convince us of the coherence of the image. In an interview, Alex Cox commented that it "was good for the integrity of the thing, to have them singing and not just the actors miming to someone else's voice."<sup>82</sup> The biopic-as-karaoke has functioned as a kind of authenticity-effect in the genre ever since *The Buddy Holly Story*, and plays into a far more conventional standard of the genre. By the 1980s, to lip-sync would be to slip-synch: to draw attention to the artificiality and the constructedness of the film.<sup>83</sup>

Mainstream critics often mistook *Sid and Nancy's* revisions as, simply, failed entertainment. As often happens with low-brow genres, negative popular reviews criticize elements that break from expected conventions. A review from *The Washington Post* expressed disappointment with a “dull” film defined by “a tone of clinical disinterest” and a lack “care,” as in empathy, for its subjects.<sup>84</sup> This negative evaluation points to the film’s work against generic expectations. For instance, a flimsy assumption of many musical biopics is that the production of entertainment must have also been entertaining. The representation of the creative process is a fundamentally elusive aspect of all musical biopics. As Ronald Bergan points out,

It is easier to make films of the events of someone’s life such as men of action, soldiers, statesmen and sportsmen, than artists. The poems of a poet, the novels of a novelist and the works of a composer are the most significant events in their lives and yet the creative act is rarely demonstrable.<sup>85</sup>

Simon Callow agrees, describing musical composition as a particularly difficult creative process to dramatize: “composing as such, like most artistic activities, is drudgery, and—unlike painting—one that it is hard to represent on the screen or stage . . . the drama, the elevation, the intensity of the music is rarely present in its creation.”<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, filmmakers repeatedly try to dramatize these moments of inspiration. *Sid and Nancy's* treatment of protagonists who fail to produce side steps this weak-point of the musical biopic. Better to depict failed artists, it says, than to fail in the presentation of artistry.

For some critics, this lack of inspiration or achievement registered as an absence too great for the film to overcome. In more highbrow contexts, however, the kind of ‘clinical dullness’ that frustrated *The Washington Post* has been

celebrated. In a review of Jean-Marie Straub's *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, Martin Walsh highlights how the film's "emphatic artifice serves . . . to reinforce our awareness of the documentary mode's limitations."<sup>87</sup> He notes the effectiveness of the film's "non-interpretive monotone, and [how] no emotional "bending" of the material is allowed."<sup>88</sup> Walsh admires the fact that *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* "makes no attempt to plunge the viewer into the drama of the past, making the past relevant to his immediate feelings . . . the viewer has a sense of detachment rather than involvement, of awareness rather than empathy."<sup>89</sup>

In a doubly high-brow context—a European art cinema film about a classical musician—these challenging qualities were well received by critics. All these features characterize *Sid and Nancy* as well, but critics were more often irritated than stimulated by them. The generic revisions introduced by this film—not only a rock'n'roll, but a *punk* biopic—situated *Sid and Nancy* in a far too low-brow context for critics to find these qualities acceptable. Though *Sid and Nancy* was too exceptional to serve as a model for future musical biopics, it remains a touchstone in the history of the genre for disintegrating numbers and making the dual focus narrative as destructive and unromantic as possible.

### **Realism and Romance in the Contemporary Musical Biopic**

As the genre moved into the 1990s and the 2000s, the musical biopic retained elements of the more dystopic, 'realistic' films of the 70s and 80s while also returning to more romantic elements of the classical musical. This balance is struck by the more careful integration of numbers with the narrative (following

the classical musical), alongside a recognition of the protagonist's work in an entertainment industry (following the 'realistic' trend). Though more contemporary musical biopics still heavily emphasize the professionalism of their lead subjects, and the labor involved in the production of popular music—the inclusion of these elements co-exist with more conventional entertainment-values.

This representational shift is correlated with the increasing integration of songs with plot development and the desires of the protagonist. While *Buddy* and *Coal Miner's Daughter* sparingly situate songs in terms of the performer's desires—and *Sid and Nancy* wholly departs from integration—musical biopics of the late 1990s began to associate songs more closely with the parallel story of the singer's personal life. In this way, the musical integrated elements of the more 'realistic' films while also returning to the romantic values of the classical Hollywood via a renewed interest in the association between numbers and narrative.

Along with the increasing correlation of numbers with the narrative, the figure of the genius musician (who could produce great songs with relative ease) returned to the musical biopic in the 1990s. *The Doors* (1991) finds a way to bridge the transition from the skepticism and restraint of 70s and 80s musical biopics toward a more enchanted depiction of the romantic artist. This Oliver Stone film includes a great deal of reflexive discourse about the artistic process—but it is all directed towards filmmaking, not musical production. Morrison tells off a bandmember interested in filmmaking: "I'm off movies, man," and questions the validity ("Is your life worth being a movie?") and originality (You've "seen this story before") of the film itself. While a great deal of doubt

and anxiety is cast over the *filming* of this musical legend's story, Morrison's ability as a musician is more fluid and free. Songs come easily to him, inspired by psychedelic reveries or through spontaneous discovery in band rehearsals.

Gregory Nava's *Why Do Fools Fall in Love* (1998), which chronicles the rise and fall of the 1950s doo-wop singer Frankie Lymon, illustrates the contemporary musical biopic's increasing association between the film narrative and numbers. This film deploys the narrative content of songs with much greater frequency than *The Buddy Holly Story*, *La Bamba*, or *Coal Miner's Daughter*. First, the title—Lymon's hit song—summarizes the film's story. *Why Do Fools Fall in Love* focuses on a royalty / estate court case where three women claim to be Lymon's ex-wife and, thus, stand to profit from this \$4 million song. The title also refers to the dominant theme of the film in that these women don't just fight over "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" but why they earlier fell helplessly for the difficult, even abusive, entertainer. Later, when Frankie leaves one of his lovers—Elizabeth (Vivica A. Fox)—for another, Zola (Halle Berry)—the lead singer of the Platters taunts Elizabeth with the lyrics of a song performed on a live television program: "He is mine. Really mine."<sup>90</sup> Lymon, portrayed as an incorrigible womanizer, woos each of his lovers with dynamic, on-stage performances with apt lyrics. Shortly after meeting Zola, Lymon performs "Baby Baby": "Baby baby how I want you . . . I'm so glad you want me too." An insert of Zola watching raptly off-stage shows that she's starting to share his flirtatious sentiments (which she first rebuffed). In a similar manner, performing the first time for Elizabeth, he sings "Goodie Goodie": "So you met someone who set you back on your heels . . . goodie goodie for me."

This tendency of the musical biopic would intensify as the genre moved

into the 2000s. Yet, it is important to clarify that the genre's reacceptance of the value of integration is not necessarily correlated with less imaginative or artistic films. As we will see with the following examples, *Ray*, *Walk the Line*, and *Beyond the Sea*, these films masterfully balance formal strategies (and also audience expectations) that would seem to be almost irreconcilable—preserving, at once, the expectation that musical performance is also work that is produced by specialized professionals and only in certain contexts (as seen in the *bizpic*, as defined by Joshua Clover), while also reclaiming the idea that music is a uniquely romantic, individual forum that allows its practitioners to express their innermost feelings and work-through their problems in a creative manner that cannot be accessed through everyday activities or conversation.

Shifting my attention to more contemporary biopics, I will chart the way that *Ray*, *Walk the Line*, and *Beyond the Sea* simultaneously balance the demand that musical representation be 'realistic' while also reintroducing elements of the classical Hollywood musical—the 'dual focus' narrative and the value of maximal integration between the narrative and the numbers.

### ***Ray*: Intensified Continuity Editing and the 'Realistic' Number**

At the start of *Ray*, the 2004 biopic on the famous soul musician, Ray Charles (Jamie Foxx), the relationship between music and narrative emphasizes artistry and industry. In the first hour of *Ray*, music ("What'd I Say"; Country Instrumental; "Route 66"; "Straighten Up"; "Everyday I Have the Blues"; "Baby Let Me Hold Your Hand"; "Midnight Hour"; "Mess Around") is presented in a manner completely familiar to the pop performer biopic.<sup>91</sup> Ray rises from a rural



nobody, despite hardships and the attempts of others to exploit him, to a towering musical figure. Similar to *La Bamba* and *The Buddy Holly Story*, in *Ray* the song selection appears arbitrary save a single exception, significant as demonstrations of Ray's talent, but not connected to any coexisting emotions.<sup>92</sup> *Ray* "[depicts] a world whose prime expressive elements—song and dance—are clearly circumscribed."<sup>93</sup> Singing is done by professionals and only in particular social settings. Though music continues through the rest of the film to be placed within realist conventions—through studio, on-stage, or informal performances—in the second act of the film Ray's songs regularly intersect with the narrative.

In a radical departure from the first hour of the film, almost every song in the remaining 100 minutes is placed next to a dramatic scene that matches the content of a song performed live or in a recording studio. With one exception ("Unchain My Heart"), All the songs that follow are connected to appropriate dramatic sequences: "I Got a Woman"; "Hallelujah, I Love Her So"; "Drown in My Own Tears"; "Mary Ann"; "If You Don't Want to You Don't Have to (Get in Trouble)"; "What Kind of Man are You"; "Night and Day"; "I Believe to My Soul"; "Georgia on my Mind"; "Hit the Road Jack"; "You Don't Know Me"; "I Can't Stop Loving You"; and "Hard Times." Most often, Ray's music is associated with one of three stages in a relationship—initial attraction, consummation, or dissolution—between Ray and a love interest: Della Bea (Kerry Washington), Mary Ann (Aunjanue Ellis), or Margie (Regina King).

An instance of this expressive match occurs when Ray suddenly bursts out of bed with the need to play a song. A startled Bea listens as Ray plays, "I Got a Woman" for his "woman way over town that's good to me." The

spontaneous song expresses both the rapturous and risqué dimensions of their relationship: this is his first, clearest expression of love and Ray can visit only when Bea's preacher-landlord is gone.

Shortly after this couple is married, another song matches Ray's emotional state. Bea pushes Ray to the bed and says, "You are gonna have one [family], starting right now. What do you think?" Ray replies, "It's what I know." "Hallelujah, I Love Her So," echoing his spoken statement, starts to play faintly in the background: "That's how I know, yes I know, Hallelujah, I love her so." The transition from one space to another is smoothly effected, with diegetic music from a live performance in the following shot/ scene beginning in the final seconds of the last shot in their private home, and Ray's repetition of the phrases "I know," spoken then sung, from one scene to the next.

The next scene in which Charles' music appears continues to link his personal story with his compositions: When the newlyweds begin to have serious problems, darker songs are aligned with their arguments. Bea discovers Ray's drugs and paraphernalia just before he must leave for months. She hysterically begs him to quit the drugs and/or let her go on the road with him. He rebuffs both requests and leaves Bea in tears. The film moves rapidly forward. In the following shot, a new singer, Mary Ann, is auditioning for his group. She is in the midst of singing "Drown in My Own Tears," which matches his abandoned wife's state of mind seconds before: "I cried so much since you've been gone, I guess I'll drown in my own tears." The fact that the audition scene begins in the middle of the song emphasizes the continuity between the previous scene and this one. We do not need an establishing shot to ease us into the

audition scene because of the thematic connection between previous scene and the performed song.

The film continues to use Ray's songs to comment on his increasingly unhappy marriage. This tendency is deployed more fluidly in the next musical sequence, which contrasts scenes between Ray and Mary Ann, now his mistress, with Ray going home to Bea to see his newborn baby. As we arrive at the bedside of Bea and Ray, "Mary Ann" begins to play. In the next shot Ray sings, "Oh Mary Ann, you sure look fine... I could love you all the time," as the sinewy Mary Ann suggestively dances across the stage. This live performance is cross-cut with domestic "loving father" scenes: Ray bathes his child with Bea—back to Mary Ann—Ray goes to the market with Bea. His wife's conservative dress contrasts with Mary Ann's glistening upper body and sexy dance. The spectator is aligned with Ray's perspective as the camera pans across the stage to follow Mary Ann in medium-close-ups; Bea, by contrast, simply moves with her husband within the frame in far less compelling two-shots.

*Ray's* "Mary Ann" resembles the title number of *Gigi*, when Gaston recognizes his love for the lead character by singing in the Jardin du Luxembourg. In both cases, the musical sequence is treated as a revelation of an emotional dilemma: how do Gaston and Ray feel about their love affairs? In each case, the character uses a song to answer the question and the given scene takes on the subjective point of view of the lead character. At the same time, though, the locations that Gaston and Ray inhabit still maintain a degree of authenticity, as actual locations: public streets and gardens, in one case, and domestic spaces and night clubs in the other. *Ray* remains autobiographically consistent, moving from banal activities with his wife to on-stage performances

with his mistress. The scene from *Gigi* fulfills a secondary function as a picturesque tour of Paris, visiting the Jardin du Luxembourg. In this respect, Elsaesser misses half of the equation when he characterizes the mise-en-scène of Gaston's "Gigi" as "a wholly subjective landscape of imagination."<sup>94</sup> Gaston, in fact, occupies a middle-ground between the "wholly subjective" and the "real world." This dual interest in location as both a "measure of character" and an "external condition" (Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White's terms for opposing tendencies in scenographic design) is achieved through filmic means typical of the eras in which *Gigi* and *Ray* were made.<sup>95</sup> The subjective and objective are paired primarily via mise-en-scène in the 1958 film, with Gaston breaking into song in a single, charmed locale: the richly layered Jardin du Luxembourg. In the 2004 film, this double-sidedness is communicated by fast-paced editing which facilitates a rapid succession of associated locales.

In "Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film," David Bordwell considers the impact of "post-classical" style on film narratives. In contrast to many contemporary scholars, he argues that new tendencies in American filmmaking do not represent a departure from classical film style, but, in fact, reinforce and "intensify" it. Bordwell writes that faster editing has not "led to a 'post-classical' breakdown of spatial continuity," but the redeployment of old rules at a faster clip. While Bordwell concedes that contemporary films have fewer establishing shots and long-take two-shots, this lack is balanced by the intensification of other classical guidelines: "At the same time, though, fast-cut dialogue has reinforced premises of the 180-degree staging system. When shots are so short, when establishing shots are brief or postponed or nonexistent, the eyelines and angles in a dialogue must be even more unambiguous and the

axis of action must be strictly respected.”<sup>96</sup> The continued continuity style, ultimately, refers to the way that these films are read by audiences. The stylistics of contemporary Hollywood still work, above all else, in support of a coherent, linear narrative. New biopic song-sequences are contiguous with action, in the manner of a classical musical, but different from the musical, as they stretch across multiple times and places at an increasingly rapid pace.

*Ray*'s use of “Hit the Road Jack” demonstrates the way that new biopics position music in the familiar way, as “performances bound by the natural limitations which normally attend such formal presentations,” while intensified continuity editing allows the songs to function narratively, as in a musical.<sup>97</sup> This song is used shortly after Ray argues with his back-up singer and lover Margie. She is furious that he has asked her to abort their child. Margie shouts, “From now on it’s strictly business between me and you!” and Ray abruptly continues their rehearsal of a new number. While Margie is still in a dramatic mode, Ray shifts them to a musical one, playing the opening notes to the song, encouraging Margie to channel her emotions through the music. The song accommodates their divergent interests, as Ray, callously devoted to the art of song, relishes the intensity that her anger brings to the performance—“Yeah. That’s it”—while Margie performs the song sincerely, really wishing to tell him off: “Hit the road Jack, and don’t you come back no more.”

The sequence continues, flashing forward to a live performance of the same song. The transition from one sequence to another is smoothly effected, as Ray’s first line – “What’d you say?” – carries the song from one space to another. The live performance has it both ways, registering as a realistic scene, while also preserving the spontaneous emotionalism of the musical. Margie continues to

stare down Ray, singing her angry, spurned lover lines directly to him in the manner of a musical. Cuts from one shot to another work subjectively, as eyeline matches from Margie's perspectives. Ray and his band play the song for an audience at the same time that we understand Margie to be singing the song to Ray in an angry outburst of emotion. Though diegetically we understand that the performance happens well after the rehearsal, the pairing of these scenes allows for the spontaneity of the musical to co-exist with contemporary standards of realism. While J.P. Telotte argues that the musical has suffered due to the success of the "realistic trend," new musical biopics resolve many of the problems Telotte and others bemoan in contemporary music-films.<sup>98</sup> In contrast to the critical consensus that the musical biopic is a relatively "safe" middlebrow genre that is rarely innovative or sophisticated, close analyses show how structurally invested these films are in older generic conventions, translating them to more contemporary standards of style.<sup>99</sup>

This analysis of *Ray* contradicts the common reading of post-1960s musicals as emptied of the romantic, expressive sentiment pervasive in classical Hollywood musicals. According to Telotte, in films like *The Buddy Holly Story*, "the expressive is clearly demarcated from the main narrative, even while realistically arising from it."<sup>100</sup> For Telotte, the new musical's adherence to contemporary codes of realism has come at the expense of expressivity: "whenever anyone does [sing], it is usually within a finitely restricted arena, the physical limits of which eventually extend to this expressiveness."<sup>101</sup> *Ray*, however, is able to fulfill contemporary expectations that song sequences be realistic without sacrificing their expressive qualities. Though *Ray* never allows amateurs to sing or characters to suddenly burst into song without the pretext of

an appropriate social forum, it absorbs and makes use of the musical structure, wherein songs express a mental state. This hybridity does not come at the expense of the integrity of the biopics real-world plausibility or the musical's spontaneity but effectively and simultaneously sustains both modes.

Dyer's insight that the musicals have not made full use of its "two modes—the historicity of the narrative and the lyricism of numbers" is worth mentioning again.<sup>102</sup> The biopics from the last decade that I survey embrace "the lyricism of numbers" more fully.<sup>103</sup> While musical biopics of the 1970s and 80s, such as *The Buddy Holly Story*, *Sid and Nancy*, and *Coal Miner's Daughter* sacrifice the spontaneity of the musical in favor of a more faithful depiction of touring and songwriting as labor. Recent examples of this sub-genre, however, have had it both ways, arranging the numbers to work narratively and expressively, in the manner of a musical, without eliminating the more typical narrative threads of the biopic: if the work involved in the production of music is minimized, the difficulty of the popular entertainer's lifestyle remains a dominant emphasis. The stories of *Ray*, *Walk the Line*, and *Beyond the Sea* certainly continue to fulfill Rose's summation of the rock biopic as based on "some mixture of three formats: the struggle, the price exacted and/or the tragic fate."<sup>104</sup>

These "formats," as Rose describes them, are almost always intertwined with the life-story of a love interest who shares in the journey of the star protagonist. Thus, the dual-focus narrative continues to be an essential point of consideration for analysis of contemporary musical biopics. Even in accounts which are, apparently, unaware of this critical term, note how centrally the couple figures in summations of these films. Glenn D. Smith Jr. writes,

the ‘characters’ of Ray Charles and Johnny Cash, despite their professional accomplishments, battle a host of moral temptations . . . However, with the assistance of their romantic partners, they eventually resolve their psychological issues and cease their immoral behavior. Thus, redemption in both *Ray* and *Walk the Line* comes by way of romantic intervention, culminating with the traditional Hollywood happy endings for each protagonist.<sup>105</sup>

Smith Jr.’s summation of resolution in *Ray* and *Walk the Line* closely matches Altman’s description of the dual-focus narrative, which characterizes musicals more generally. Reviewing Smith Jr.’s summary of key plot-points in these biopics, note how exclusively they refer to the stories of the male leads—accomplishments, temptations, psychological issues, immoral behavior, redemption, and intervention.

Though all these developments are eventually resolved with the help of a life-partner, this female love interest remains of secondary interest to the male lead. Here, again, Smith Jr. has done some summary work that can be contextualized in terms of the dual-focus narrative. On *Ray*’s wife, Smith Jr. describes Bea as “not nearly as well known as her future husband” but

a courteous and compassionate soul who understands that professional success takes hard work, sacrifices, and great deal of talent . . . . Bea helps her husband realize that his moral integrity, and, by extension, credibility as a husband, father, and musician, cannot be restored unless he stops his immoral behavior and regains his psychological composure.<sup>106</sup>

As with *The Buddy Holly Story*, then, the dual-focus narrative of these films is decidedly not that of the classical Hollywood musical. Rick Altman describes the musical’s dual-focus narrative as featuring male and female leads that perfectly off-set one another:



Instead of focusing all its interest on a single central character, following the trajectory of her progress, the American film musical has a dual focus, built around parallel stars of opposite sex and radically divergent values. This dual-focus structure requires the viewer to be sensitive not so much to chronology and progression—for the outcome of the male/female match is entirely conventional and thus quite predictable—but to simultaneity and comparison.<sup>107</sup>

While the musical biopic does, indeed, frequently feature the wife who reels in and stabilizes her wayward husband, she matters only in so far as it enables the male-genius to maintain or re-establish a solid footing on which to practice his craft.

While wives figure as important characters in these biopics, this genre, amongst all film genres, is most defined by “focusing all its interest on a single central character, following the trajectory of [their] progress.” Rather than invoking “simultaneity and comparison,” the biopic continues to work by way of “chronology and progression.”<sup>108</sup> Indeed, following Smith Jr.’s analysis, the significance of spouses in these films matters exactly as much as their ability to maintain their star-husbands’ successful career. Yet, where *Beyond the Sea* and *Ray* are more limited in their use of the dual-focus narrative, as its co-stars are not musicians in their own right, *Walk the Line* represents an exception to the rule, with both leads as star-actors outside the film-text, and star-musicians within it.

### ***Walk the Line*'s Narrative Songs**

*Walk the Line* deploys music narratively, with music arranged primarily around the lead star’s love interests. *Walk the Line* could, just as plausibly, be titled *Johnny and June*. [Note how a promotional poster for the film highlights the

couple, not Cash alone. (add later)] Cash's music, as positioned by the film, marks off stages in their troubled relationship. Contemporary standards of realism are preserved by presenting Johnny and June as *musical* partners in addition to *romantic* partners; their singing is done exclusively on-stage. This arrangement allows Johnny and June to sing for each other while also singing for an audience.

Since we know that these characters are destined to become a couple, this anticipated dual focus narrative constitutes the narrative function of song performances in *Walk the Line*. When Johnny sings "Home of the Blues" just before inviting June to join him on stage, and, soon after, they become lovers, the lyrics work presciently, indicating the rocky affair ahead. The song June performs with him next, "Time's a Wastin'" encourages the expectation of their coupledness:

"Home of the Blues" (Johnny and June Cash)

Just around the corner there's heartaches  
Down the street that losers use  
If you can wade in through the teardrops  
You'll find me at the home of the blues.

Time's a Wastin'" (Johnny and June Cash)

Johnny: Now I've got arms  
June: And I've got arms  
Together: Let's get together and use those arms.

The narrative function of these songs relies on the particularity of this arrangement. In the classical Hollywood musical, characters sing love songs as they recognize that they are in love. In contrast, June and Johnny unwittingly sing love songs that prophesy the narrative. The use of love songs in this way

relies on a unique structure of the audience knowing the biographies of the two entertainers and the characters not knowing.

Once June and Johnny become a couple, their songs function as expressions of personal feeling, deployed in the manner of a classical musical. “Jackson” is performed twice, first marking their pairing, and later when they agree to marry. This piece works as their signature tune, demonstrating their mutual recognition of love: “[Johnny:] You’re my big mouth woman, [June:] And you’re my guitar pickin’ man.” Though the song begins with marriage—“We got married in a fever, hotter than a pepper sprout”—ostensibly “Jackson” is about a troubled relationship. The man and woman exchange verses of the song with the man vowing to go to Jackson to “mess around” and the woman replying “Go play your hand... See if I care.” Yet, after a six-chorus exchange, it is clear that the song is more an exuberant ritual than a serious argument.<sup>109</sup>

### ***Beyond the Sea: Romance in Reflexivity***

Similar to *Ray* and *Walk the Line*, the Bobby Darin (Kevin Spacey), biopic *Beyond the Sea* frequently connects music to narrative developments between the lead singer and his wife / actress Sandra Dee (Kate Bosworth); however, unlike these other films, *Beyond the Sea* sometimes dispenses with performances that match Darin’s music to a particular scene, simply layering his songs over appropriate scenes as non-diegetic music. “Charade,” for instance, plays over a dramatic argument, with Darin and Dee furiously packing their suitcases: “Oh what a hit we made / We came on next to closing / Best on the bill / Lovers until . . . / Love left a masquerade.” Though Darin is never seen singing this song, it is clear that the scene’s authorial voice is his, with the music (as in the

performative scenes) resonating at an expressive level. Where “Charade” parallels the low-point of its associated scene, “Fabulous Places,” which also notes marital trouble, is used contrapuntally. *Beyond the Sea* makes ironic use of a song written-in-earnest about the “so many fabulous faraway places to see.” While the song is a straightforward celebration of the world’s attractions, its lyrics (“Pleasant as home is, it isn't what Rome is . . . / So why stay there . . .”) take on a different meaning as Darin’s exuberant live performance of the song is intercut with shots which illustrate his own exhaustion, and his wife’s boredom and developing alcoholism.

The climax of the film, in which Darin defiantly performs a final number in spite of his poor health, deploys music narratively. Near the end of the film, Darin, fatigued and in ill-health, prepares for his final live performance. Though Darin’s manager (Bob Hoskins) cautions him against singing out of obligation—he has his sanity and health to consider—Darin persists. Minutes before Darin goes on stage, the manager asks him, matter-of-factly, if he is prepared to sing. Darin wearily replies that he is simply “trying to find a heartbeat.” The song he proceeds to perform, “The Curtain Falls” connects to multiple narrative interests of the film. The lyrics reflect Darin’s love of singing (“Nothin’ else would I trade for this”); the film’s attempt to make this a personal, psychological portrait (“Off comes the make up / Off comes the clown’s disguise”); and, finally, the fact that Darin’s career is over and he is dying (“The curtain’s fallin’ / The music softly dies”). In the second verse, the film responds to the lyrical content of the song, as Darin’s final performance is intercut with shots of him confined to a hospital bed, in his final decline. This sequence neatly summarizes the trend I find in recent

musical biopics— to deploy music narratively, in a refiguration of the style of the classical Hollywood musical.

*Beyond the Sea* also displays considerable self-consciousness about its status as a musical. Structured loosely around the concept of Darin starring in a movie about himself, the film repeatedly questions the believability of its story. When Darin first flashes back to his childhood, moving to a song/dance number through his neighborhood, “Little Bobby Darin” (sometimes positioned as the actor in the film within the film, other times as Darin’s image of himself as a boy) interrupts the scene to say, “You didn’t go dancing down the street like that.” Darin replies, “I know, it was a fantasy sequence... memories are like moonbeams, we do what we want with them.” The incredulous Little Bobby Darin, who directs the elder Darin’s attention to the “truth” of his childhood (disease and poverty), serves as a proxy for contemporary film spectators and their skepticism of “unbelievable stories” and “musicals” in general. As both Altman and Telotte note, music in contemporary films is no longer invested with the same transformative potential: “any transformation which song and dance might work on our existence, [musical biopic films] suggest, is at best momentary, a fleeting protest against a general loss of vitality afflicting modern society.”<sup>110</sup> The remainder of *Beyond the Sea* does, indeed, focus on exhausting, traumatic truths: Darin loses his audiences, has marital problems, and learns that a woman he believed to be his sister was, in fact, his mother. The film concludes with the nostalgic, but nonetheless depressing, “The Curtain Falls,” marking the end of his career and his death. The older version of Darin, it seems, has adopted Little Bobby Darin’s skepticism about the limited power of music and imagination.

An image of Darin dying in a hospital bed, however, is followed by an image of his son opening a suitcase with film reels reading "Beyond the Sea." Now Little Bobby Darin returns to remind his adult self of what he said earlier, "that memories are like moonbeams." The film transitions from the bittersweet "Curtain" to its final number: "As Long as I'm Singin'," a more optimistic, comforting duet between child and adult versions of Darin ("Long as I'm singin' / Then the world's all right / And everything's swingin' / Long as I'm singin' my song"). The implication, of course, is that Darin is mortal but his music will continue to inspire those after him. It is significant also that Darin's son is introduced at the very end of the film as a completely undeveloped character, standing in for his future audience. Music, it seems, has redeemed Darin's life (and the lives of future singers and listeners) after all. Regardless of whether individual viewers read *Beyond the Sea's* attempt to pitch music in these terms as successful or unsuccessful, the film undeniably tries to invest music with a "special, romantic, quasi-religious status."<sup>111</sup>

### **Conclusion: From Communal to Individual Musical Performance**

In answer to numerous contemporary critics, who discuss the demise of the classical Hollywood musical and the emergence of the musical biopic with regret, this recent cycle of biopics demonstrates that expressivity and spontaneity are not necessarily lost with the realist expectations that singing be done by professionals. Although, as Altman asserts, contemporary musical films have, largely, dismissed "the symbiotic relationship [of the American musical tradition] which once tied the musical's canned entertainment to the audience's

potential for live, personal production,” the musical’s revivification does not need to happen via re-embracing notions of amateur performance and the community.<sup>112</sup> What has been lost in the communal performances of classical Hollywood musicals has been gained in individual expressivity in these recent biopics.<sup>113</sup> A communication scholar’s complaint about *Ray* and *Walk the Line* focuses on the tendency of these films to celebrate the uniquely talent. In his critical account of “the American Dream” as seen in *Ray* and *Walk the Line*, Smith Jr. is disappointed that

The films ignore the fact that the ‘real’ Charles and Cash were, in fact, part of an economic and political system that placed them into a strict division of labor in which celebrities were constructed and were controlled, a ‘cog in the wheel,’ a commodity to be at one time celebrated and then eventually discarded when their capital value was spent.<sup>114</sup>

This criticism, which highlights these films refusal to reduce the talents of Cash or Charles to their profitability underscores their central interest in celebrating their individuality, both as people and artists. Thus, in these films, the idiosyncratic talent of performers like Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, and Bobby Darin displace the communal, every-one-can-sing-it musical tune. Though “the financial side of music production” is no longer romanticized in these films, this has not given way to the “malaise” that Altman notes, nor a picture so bleak as to portray their subjects as a mere “cog in the wheel,” but something in between.<sup>115</sup> Even if these films confirm the assumption that popular performers sing for a commercial audience, this does not diminish the power of their music to communicate on a more personal level. Altman once noted how music and dance function as a signifier of “personal and communal joy” in the classical Hollywood musical; in the new musical biopic there is a shifting of the scales.<sup>116</sup>

Recent pop performer biopics place less emphasis on music as a communal form, but these films also allow for more individual musicalities to exist on screen.



## CHAPTER IV: PSYCHOANALYTIC ACCOUNTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY MUSICAL BIOPIC

In a 2002 *New Yorker* profile, Willie Nelson (who once conformed to an ideal image of the country star— hard drinkin’ and hard livin’) appears as a picture of health in the following setting “Nine-forty-five on a Thursday morning, and the songwriter and singer Willie Nelson is on a bus parked on the north side of West Fifty-third Street, steaming soy milk for a friend's decaffeinated cappuccino.”<sup>1</sup> The 69 year old Nelson, in good spirits, reports that his drinking days are over and is so conscientious, in fact, that he is watching his dairy milk intake. He says, “My wife actually got worried about my drinking so much regular milk, you know, so she got me into rice milk and now soy milk, which I greatly enjoy.” Nelson continues, “A soy mocha's a fine thing.”<sup>2</sup> Why is this image, of a productive and talented popular musician aging gracefully— working happily and healthfully so unsatisfying? Something about the reformed Nelson and his “fine” soy mochas is viscerally unsettling. This *should* be a pleasing image for fans and non-fans alike. For fans, Nelson’s success is deserved and promises continued production. For those interested in celebrities and stars more generally, Nelson models a well-managed life. This picture of Nelson, however, is strangely incongruous. The unsatisfying affect that this portrait produces can be ready symptomatically, pointing to the fact that the cultural work performed by the popular entertainer exceeds common sense explanations.

A careful analysis of celebrity consumption reveals the psychological foundation of this cultural phenomenon. Our emotional investment in star

narratives and the ritual repetition with which we consume them goes beyond what can be explained through rational accounts restricted to visible evidence.<sup>3</sup> Psychoanalysis—an analytical framework defined around the project of explicating the unconscious—figures as an ideal theoretical model to use in this context. Following this approach, the spectators investment in the star is largely invisible and unknown, but becomes visible through gaps, traces, incongruities, and excesses that cannot otherwise be explained.

A psychoanalytic reading helps us make sense of the healthy Nelson's incongruity. Explicit and acceptable interpretations of this portrait—rational, well-wishing appreciations of the singer's talent and success—are difficult to imagine. This picture of the happily aging star disrupts the expected function that popular musicians perform in the symbolic order. It is easier to imagine an older country singer as washed-up, regretful, and having paid the price for a reckless lifestyle. In fact, such a character, Jeff Bridges' Bad Blake, received the Academy Award for Best Performance in *Crazy Heart* (2009). Blake fits the preferred image of the country star: he drinks too much, is unable to manage personal relationships, and repeatedly makes bad decisions. In short, he appears driven to self-destruction. Yet, the benefit of his instability and unreliability is his ability to compose songs based on his "life, unfortunately." A character like Bad Blake resembles our ideal vision of a popular music star—able to express the depths of emotion and experience that evade everyday articulation yet unable to sustain a functional life. In this way, the pop star doubly gratifies the fan, as something more and something than less than himself.

In his brief but suggestive genealogy of "love-and-death pop idolatry," Michael Atkinson discusses the dominance of the hedonistic, self-destructive pop

music icon. He situates Elvis as the star that established for the second half of the twentieth century,

the prototype for every pop myth imaginable . . .  
 Even if it took more than twenty years for the crush of  
 iconolatry, wealth, and drug abuse to boomerang  
 back at him, the classic trajectory of Elvis' life is still  
 clung to popularly as modern tragedy -- as if he was  
*meant* to die sometime before getting fat, middle-aged  
 and campy, didn't, and we'll just pretend he did.<sup>4</sup>

After Elvis, additional music stars— Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain— would meet a similar fate, succumbing to an early death that also increased their mythic status.

In his 1960 study of *The Stars*, French philosopher Edgar Morin discusses James Dean similarly. Describing Dean's appeal, Morin notes the centrality of a young death to his legend: "Death fulfills the destiny of every mythological hero by fulfilling his double nature: human and divine. It fulfills his profound humanity, which is to struggle heroically against the world, to confront heroically a death which ultimately overwhelms him."<sup>5</sup> This is, perhaps, a difficult truth of celebrity consumption for us to admit: can we own up to identification with and enjoyment from the entire story of these imploding pop idols? Manifestly, discourse surrounding legends-gone-too-soon emphasize the sadness surrounding their story, but fails to recognize that had stars lived longer and more functionally (à la Nelson), they would also be stripped of their most essential social function: to dramatize a life dynamically and fully, in a way that exaggerates the star's talents *and* failures. The ideal star is as destructive as he is talented.<sup>6</sup> This is the fan's desire that Nelson, by way of a disappointing counterexample, calls into clear focus. The healthy star, who at age 69 happily steams decaf soy cappuccinos is just as clearly *not* the model image of the pop

star equally as much as James Dean and Elvis Presley precisely convey the ideal of the stardom and untimely death.

### **Joan Copjec and Narcissism in Psychoanalytic Film Studies**

Psychoanalysis provides us with a richer way of understanding the mechanisms of human desire and identification at work in the consumption of pop stars. Few scholars have jointly studied psychoanalysis and star studies. While a vast body of work exists on psychoanalysis and film spectatorship, and a handful of texts address the consumption of stars, these approaches have not intersected with the frequency or focus one might expect.<sup>7</sup> Jean Copjec's intervention in psychoanalytic film theory – concerning a misunderstanding of narcissism – is crucially important to my application of psychoanalysis to the consumption of pop stars. Copjec finds that film theorists have long been working with a definition of narcissism closer to its use in everyday language than psychoanalysis. Canonic psychoanalytic accounts of spectatorship have positioned narcissistic identification in the simple way, assuming that “The image seems not only perfectly to represent the subject, it seems also to be an image of the subject's perfection.”<sup>8</sup> Narcissism, according to psychoanalysis, is not just positive and aggrandizing—it is a conflicted identification motivated by negative feelings such as shame and inadequacy. Copjec reminds us that “In Lacan's description, misrecognition retains its negative force in the process of construction. As a result, the process is conceived no longer as a purely positive one but rather as one with an internal dialectic.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the spectator's

investment in the film is both an aggrandizement and a devaluation. Cinema represents both a sense of sufficiency and the threat of lack.

Copjec also finds fault in the exclusion of the “split” (as opposed to unitary) subject from psychoanalytic accounts of spectatorship. In this case, the optical basis of cinematic spectatorship has been emphasized overmuch, while a sufficiently complex understanding of the spectator’s psychology has been left out of the equation. Copjec argues that we must understand the subject’s conflictedness as essential (and ultimately more important than the material conditions of spectatorship) to the understanding of cinema-texts. Where psychoanalytic accounts of spectatorship center around the “image,” Copjec refocuses our attention, instead, on the spectating subject: “The Lacanian subject, who may doubt the accuracy of even its most ‘scientific representations’ is submitted to a *superegoic* law that is radically different from the optical laws to which the film theoretical subject is submitted.”<sup>10</sup> It seems a rational step beyond this to posit a relationship not just between a subject and an image, but a subject and a subject. If we grant apparatus theory that the filmgoer disavows the material foundations of filmmaking and spectatorship in order to immerse himself in the experience, shouldn’t we sometimes (in complimentary studies) take the spectator on his own terms (or in his own fantasy)? A fuller account of the consumer’s fantasy relationship with stars leads us to a reasonable but potentially film-studies-heretical conclusion: that we must foreground the specificity of the film-text (and the conditions of spectatorship) a bit less in order to understand the consumption of celebrities on-screen. Such an approach acknowledges the textual specificity of individual films and the material conditions of spectatorship, but also looks beyond this. Celebrity consumption

must also grant the subject's interaction with these personae through other media, and the way that this fandom, cumulatively, adds up to a fantasy-relationship that feels as if it transcends the basis of any particular material foundation— it is, in the rapture of fandom, a connection between one subject and another.

Copjec's redefinition of narcissism greatly expands the range of what we take as the basis of this cinematic encounter— and how we perceive the subjects presented on-screen. The "split" spectator does not experience cinematic identification as assured and positive; he is motivated by feelings of uncertainty and insufficiency. We look to stars and to cinema and find, not illustrations of everyone's greatness, but a confirmation of "the subject's fundamental dependence on the faults it finds in representation and in itself."<sup>11</sup> This narcissistic identification is destined to fail, but for this very reason it is also desired and subject to repetition: "Narcissism, then, seeks the self beyond the self-image, with which the subject constantly finds fault and in which it constantly fails to recognize itself."<sup>12</sup> Thus, our understanding of film spectatorship is turned toward the negative side of identification and its inevitable failure.<sup>13</sup> As I will detail shortly, this kind of cinematic identification is dramatized especially well by the contemporary biopic— which has increasingly turned towards the portrayal of scandalous, insufficient, and semi-coherent portrayals of the individual in place of the classical era's "great man" biopic.

Something missing from Copjec's reframed version of psychoanalytic spectatorship and especially for my purposes is the way that (beyond their temporary incarnation as a particular character) the star's solicitation of identification exceeds film appearances. Without elaborating beyond a

suggestive paragraph each, Richard deCordova and P. David Marshall have both noted how psychoanalytic film studies has elided the importance of the star system. deCordova contrasts the investment of the film spectator with the fan's interest in the star:

The 'apparatus' of the star system has been described here as an orientation of the spectator's attention as well, but not essentially a visual orientation. The star system leads us toward that which is behind or beyond the image, hidden from sight. It is in this sense that one can recognize a tension between the optical basis of the cinematic apparatus and that part of it that was put in place with the star system. The former depends on a syntagmatic movement of vision from one shot to the next, the latter on a paradigmatic movement that seeks out the truth concealed behind the images.<sup>14</sup>

Copjec's account of the psychoanalytic film spectator offers a way out of the contrast that deCordova sets up, with the fan's interest opposing the spectator's. In Copjec's version of cinematic identification, the film screen represents an "impossible real" rather than an "ideal." She writes that "the Lacanian gaze . . . marks the *absence* of a signified; it is an *unoccupiable* point, not, as film theory claims, because it figures an unrealizable ideal but because it indicates an impossible real. . . . The subject, in short, cannot be located or locate itself at the point of the gaze, since this point marks, on the contrary, its very annihilation."<sup>15</sup> This interpretation lends itself better to an image of the restless spectator, driven to seek out other avenues of *jouissance*, other nodes on the "signifying network" of stardom that carry the same affect. Thus, what is proposed as a very film-specific problem can be readily applied to multi-media entertainment consumption.

Marshall also points to the star as a fact of cinematic spectatorship that is not well accounted for by psychoanalytic film studies, which relies, overmuch, on identifications specific to a given film text. He writes: “Whereas psychoanalytic film studies rely predominantly on the text and its ability to engage the spectator in a form of identification, the celebrity is specifically an engagement with an external world . . . the celebrity element of the star is its transcendence of the text in whatever form.”<sup>16</sup> I, too, believe that if we are to study identifications with stars (not just film characters), we would do best to attend broadly to star-texts beyond the film-text. This argument could be made generally, but the “double level” of the biopic star makes this expanded conception especially relevant to this genre.

As Custen has observed, the biopic character entails “a double level of the articulation of fame . . . these two levels of image create . . . the polysemic star image.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the biopic performance always points beyond the individual film character to the two stars that exist outside the cinema: to the star-actor and to the famous personality who they portray. Of all film genres, the biopic most clearly represents the reach of the spectator’s identification beyond the screen—the space which has been fetishized at the expense of an appropriately expanded understanding of celebrity consumption.

Through the careful analysis of two contemporary musical biopics—Todd Haynes’ study of Bob Dylan, *I’m Not There* (2007) and VH1’s made-for-TV film *Man in the Mirror: The Michael Jackson Story* (2004)—I put these proposed models of psychoanalytic film study and star study into practice. This chapter functions as both a film-specific project (if the reader wishes to stop there) and a case for studying film in the broader context of other popular forms. My



application of Copjec's corrective account of psychoanalytic film identification could stop with the readings of individual film. Yet, my object of study—musical biopics and popular music stars—necessitates a broader consideration of cinematic identification. I apply Copjec's account of cinematic spectatorship as part of a broader network of identification that extends through popular coverage in the press and the popular musician's own performances.

### **Recuperating the Contemporary Biopic as "Revisionist Pathography"**

The subject's negativity and failure are placed center-stage in Copjec's redefined account of the spectator's narcissistic identification with the cinematic image. Both elements of this recalibrated understanding of reception are expressed in the textual features of the contemporary biopic, which has increasingly focused on the insufficiencies of the star subject. Curiously, it is precisely this turn (toward a recognition of the "split" subject) that led George Custen, the biopic's most prominent critic, to cast-off the genre's importance since the 1960s as "minor" and less worthy of our critical attention. I argue, in contrast, that the contemporary biopic's investment in "revisionist pathography" and scandal stands to tell us much about the relationship between stars, fans, and the way that the "split" subject seeks resolution in the repeated consumption of these pop-myths about very good and very bad individuals.

Since the 1960s, the biographical film has less frequently worked in the "hagiographic" mode that dominated the genre in the classical era. The tendency to idealize the star subject has increasingly been displaced by, in Custen's terms, "revisionist pathography."<sup>18</sup> In an article about Karen Carpenter

biopics, Mary Desjardins also notes a broad shift towards scandalous subjects. She writes, "Contemporary biopics associate authenticity with knowledge of scandal."<sup>19</sup> Custen associates this shift with television's new place at the top of the mass culture industry: "television began to penetrate the lives of Americans, seizing the cultural terrain once occupied by film. The kind of narrative of fame constructed by cinema and the studio system that spawned it would soon give way to the new and different symbolic world created by television."<sup>20</sup> Television presented fame and celebrity in markedly different terms than film: "the parade of people on TV live in miniature in our homes, in spaces public and private. Tragedy happens to others, and the famous don't have it nearly as good as we thought. It is comforting to be safely at home, watching these horrible things happen to my neighbors, and not to me... on TV."<sup>21</sup> Thus, television made scandal-based coverage an increasingly common part of mass culture, influencing, also, the mode of biography in films: "TV biopics would, for the most part, focus on the seedy or pathological angle of fame, leaving Hollywood with its increasingly outdated and unhip 'great man' approach."<sup>22</sup> I agree with Custen's claims that the biopic increasingly became a television genre characterized by "pathography." I disagree with his conclusion that its movement toward scandal and television makes the genre less important or less worthy of critical attention.

Instead of dismissing the biopic's turn against the "great man" film, the increasing negative appeal of the biopic (reflected in the presentation of the split subjects) offers a way of understanding our investment in consuming stars and celebrities. Michael Jackson's story, which features even more exaggerated contrast between dysfunction and massive popularity, is a case-in-point film for

the genre as a whole— as every biopic (to a certain extent) relies upon a selectively presented, split subject whose goodness, badness, or potential for both is exaggerated for dramatic effect.

If critics of the biopic have noted how part of the genre's appeal lies in the spectator's imagined identification of parallel desires, this has been explained at a more everyday level than the one I outline here. Dennis Bingham, for instance, concludes his monograph on the biopic with the following conclusion, "We would love to imagine our own lives in story form, wouldn't we, ourselves as the subjects of our own biopics? Perhaps in cultures that most celebrate a myth of the individual, biopics are devoutly to be desired, for the same reasons that any hint of conventional generic form is deplored."<sup>23</sup> A psychoanalytic account of the biopic's appeal provides a more developed explanation of the genre's contradictory valuation. The presentation of a "split" subject both threatens and appeals to the spectator due to unconscious identification. We are attracted by the split biopic subject— someone both greater and more able than ourselves *and* more shameful and abject—who points toward the outermost possibilities of our being.

Critical avoidance of the contemporary biopic may well be explained by the residual influence of the humanist view of the subject. By this account, the individual is understood to know himself and his motivations. In most cases, the humanist subject is expected to gradually learn from and improve himself over the course of his life, which can be best understood in terms of a linear narrative. Psychoanalysis holds a remarkably different view of the human subject.

The subjects featured in these contemporary biopics are accounted for much more effectively by psychoanalysis. As opposed to the aggrandized, easily

understood individual life story that underpins humanism, the psychoanalytic subject is much more restricted: largely driven by unconscious motives and the range of his being is greatly determined by childhood circumstances. In this view, the subject's subject identity and self-understanding emerging primarily as unconscious and adaptive responses to a given context, not as the result of individual agency and ingenuity (attributes commonly celebrated by the biopic).

Custen writes that the "lesson one learns from biopic vicissitudes . . . is quite simple: with an unusual gift comes unusual suffering."<sup>24</sup> Yet, Custen inexplicably focuses on the "great men" of the classical era biopic, neglecting the contemporary biopic because it emphasizes suffering too much. This increased emphasis in suffering pushes the biopic's typical subject away from a humanist understanding, towards a psychoanalytic one. Renata Salecl positions the tendency toward suffering as, perhaps, *the* key insight of psychoanalysis:

If psychoanalysis teaches us anything, it is that human beings are not inclined to achieve happiness. On the contrary, they find special enjoyment in suffering. And the whole history of psychoanalysis is concerned with discovering the mechanisms that drive the subject on this path of self destruction.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the appeal of the biopic's long-suffering protagonists may be better accounted for not as something which must come with "an unusual gift," but something (the sense of a split self) that comes with us all, but which we would rather see in others than ourselves.

The films I analyze in this chapter effectively illustrate the psychological appeal of the celebrity biopic. These biopics evince the split in valuation that commonly defines this genre. Where the Todd Haynes' portrait of Bob Dylan, *I'm Not There*, is considered a high-brow exploration of an artistic entertainer, the

Jackson film occupies a much lower position on the cultural hierarchy. *Man in the Mirror* is a made-for-television film produced more with an eye for efficiency and timeliness than artistic craft. It profiles an entertainer more for his scandals than his music— indeed, Jackson’s music (which was unavailable for use in this unauthorized, cheaply produced film) is nowhere to be found. Correlated with this artistic valuation, *I’m Not There* and *Man in the Mirror* present the celebrity subject in very different ways. If we accept the psychoanalytic insight that human subjectivity is founded on a certain splitting of the self— the different selves that the films present are relevant beyond the celebrity phenomenon. They are also representations of the human subject. If we accept the subject as founded on “a certain nonbeing upon which he raises up his being,” these biopics represent compelling different visions of the Individual’s management of this constitutive fact of existence.<sup>26</sup> *Man in the Mirror* and *I’m Not There* share an investment in the incompleteness of their star subjects. They appeal to the spectator by representing subjects defined by the very dilemmas of identity and being that characterize everyone. While the “great man” films were weighted towards the aggrandized half of being, these films turns towards the “negative force” that defines the “internal dialectic” of identification.<sup>27</sup> Beyond this common ground, the Individual’s management of the “split” self in *I’m Not There* and *Man in the Mirror* is starkly different. *Man in the Mirror*’s Jackson disavows the split subject in favor of splitting, reconciling these doubts by perceiving the self and others as wholly good or bad. *I’m Not There*, by contrast, takes the multiple and contradictory facts of being as a given – and playfully embraces the possibility of multiple selves, the instability of meaning, and the inscrutability of the human subject. In both cases, I also consider original materials produced by

Jackson and Dylan; I find that the films appropriately represent the stars' presentations of the self. In his own material, Dylan cultivated multiplicity, antagonism, elusiveness, and contradiction while Jackson tried to project wholeness, stability, and goodness. Fittingly, the Dylan film is complimentary to the artist personae that he cultivated, while the Jackson film presents a more ambivalent reading of the star subject.

### **The "Split" Biography:**

#### ***Man in the Mirror: The Michael Jackson Story***

A scene near the end of VH1's made-for-television-feature, *Man in the Mirror: The Michael Jackson Story*, dramatizes the film's title. The star rehearses for a comeback special to the point of utter exhaustion in a dance space before a studio mirror. His manager, concerned for the star's health, tries unsuccessfully to restrain Jackson's preparation. A series of jump cuts (portraying the obsessive practice of the same acts) and a rhythmic, foreboding score mark Jackson's preparation as repetition-compulsion, and our certainty of nearing a crisis increases as the scene continues. Finally, as Jackson collapses, the film's optical collapses along with the film's point-of-view moves from unstable to intentionally incoherent. While the jump cuts which conveyed his excessive rehearsal were difficult to view, his fall is accompanied with rapid panning shots and such decentered, mobile short takes that the scene is nausea-inducing, even on television. Jackson is completely decentered and unstable. Then, the scene's tone shifts entirely. A series of close-ups appear surrounded by the glare of spotlights (of Liz Taylor, Jackson's father, Diana Ross, and his manager) accompanied with a mild, lullaby-like score. Diana Ross tells him "We love you

Michael,” while his father insists, “I made you what you are.” Thus, the scene is divided between two self-perceptions: one of a dissolving, failing self and another of a great, incredibly accomplished self. Just after Jackson collapses, he is visited by voices telling him he is entitled and obligated to greatness. What is it that attracts the mass audience to such a split presentation of the star subject—the celebrity that appears to be so much more and so much less than we are?

It should not be surprising that cultural texts play out this drama of overvaluation and devaluation if we consider the centrality of splitting to ego formation. In Jacques Lacan’s account of the mirror-stage, the infant’s recognition of his own reflection reveals a mode of understanding the self that is central to psychic life. At this moment, the infant has a dual-sense of both power and powerlessness, as he is both aware of his own neediness and lack of mobility, while, at the same time, he aggrandizes the image he sees before him, as more than it actually is, as a self whose importance, attractiveness, and so on, is greatly exaggerated.<sup>28</sup> This sense of a split self will continue to define the subject’s experience of his relationship to the social world. To know both an insufficient self from within while also imagining and performing a fully sufficient self from without “gives rise to an inexhaustible squaring of the ego’s audits” whose perpetual conflict will continue to define the subject’s negotiation of self-image and satisfaction.<sup>29</sup> Where the ego’s negotiation of these identifications is largely an unconscious process, a film like *Man in the Mirror* makes this movement visible and accessible – but in a way that is located comfortably outside of the self. Here, the valuation of a subject is the central question at stake in the drama. The film pitches two opposite conclusions and moves dizzyingly between the possibilities that Jackson may be a

misunderstood, childlike star who we ought to celebrate, or that he may be a monstrous predator. In short, he is either the best sort of person or the worst sort of person. The fact that this split-identification is carried out via this bizarre star (such an Other) frees spectators from supposing that this representation might have anything to do with them— an ideal condition for a powerful unconscious identification.

While some of this analysis is specific to Jackson (the magnitude of his stardom is matched by appropriately greater degrees of overvaluation and undervaluation), split consumption is broadly characteristic of media coverage and fan reception of stars. Discussions of celebrities provide a social sphere in which ruthless evaluations of worthiness are permitted and safe. By comparison, everyday gossip requires much more careful and cautious negotiation.

In her study of diva-narratives, Melissa Bradshaw considers this apparently contradictory kind of fandom. Looking at the rise-and-fall stories of female pop singers (such as Britney Spears), Bradshaw finds fans equally invested in the star figure's success *and* failure. Bradshaw's description of the fan's ambivalent investment in the star bears close resemblance to the doublesidedness of Jackson's reception:

Even as we cheer her on, buy her records, and stare at the pictures of her we have taped to our walls, our adoration is equivocal: we are resentful of her successes and secretly hope for her failures. We want her to give and give until she cracks, and when she cracks we want to be in the front row, ready to witness every moment of her abjection and shame.<sup>30</sup>

In explaining the appeal of this ambivalent figure, Bradshaw reads the diva "as a stand-in for the fetishized mother—and a properly feminine self— that we



ambivalently adore, mourn, and hate.”<sup>31</sup> This reading of the diva’s social/psychological function helps explain the attraction of Jackson’s narrative to a mass audience as well. Although Bradshaw correlates this kind of ambivalent consumption with the “diva” and the “mother,” this analysis of Jackson illustrates that ambivalent fandom (equally invested in celebrating and denigrating) is not restricted to the female star. Bradshaw outlines the “straightforward narrative trajectory” of divadom as follows:

[U]nderdog with big talent and/or hunger for fame overcomes hardships of impoverished beginnings to make it big; along the way makes choice to sacrifice normative womanhood for artistic and/or commercial success; with stardom comes the crisis of maintaining stardom; star inevitably dims, either through tragedy or aging; diva dies alone.<sup>32</sup>

This plotline bears very close resemblance to the musical biopic narrative—whether the protagonist is male or female. Compare Bradshaw’s summary of the diva narrative to Babington and Evans’ schematic summary of the musical biopic. (see Appendix A) Bradshaw’s gender specific approach elides the fact that identity formation (as elaborated in Lacan’s “mirror stage”) for both men *and* women is characterized by this dual process of aggrandizement and doubt. This ambivalence is expressed often in the biopic. By Robert Rosenstone’s broad account, this genre positions lead subjects “as exemplars of lives, actions, and individual value systems we either admire or dislike or admire and dislike.”<sup>33</sup>

In Jackson’s case, the presentation of the celebrity as *more than* and *less than* is consistent across both his own work and cultural productions about him. In addition to a close analysis of the VH1 film, I will analyze how Jackson’s own work contributes to his split presentation and reception. In the latter half of his

career, Jackson increasingly made his life-story and reputation the subject of his songs. The commercial, pop style of Jackson's songs pairs oddly with the personal appeals of his lyrics. In a wide ranging analysis of his work since the late 80s, I study Jackson's performance of his star image in songs ("Man in the Mirror," "Leave Me Alone," "Black or White," "Scream," and "Childhood"), videos, and cover art. While Jackson denounced *Man in the Mirror* as an inaccurate representation of his life, I show how the unauthorized film and Jackson's own material display a similar investment in splitting. This tendency, to divide understandings of the self and others into categories of absolute sufficiency or lack, is a textual commonality of both the entertainer's material and the biopic.

*Man in the Mirror* bears out this kind of double-sided presentation— with both an aggrandized and devalued representation of Jackson. VH1 produced this biopic at a time when Jackson was more defined by scandal and infamy than celebration. After Jackson was first accused of child abuse in 1993, his musical production was sporadic. He released just two albums in the final 16 years of his life: *HIStory: Past, Present, and Future, Book I* (1995) and *Invincible* (2001). A 2002 decision by Jackson's camp to authorize a tell-all television special in which the star would openly discuss his now-scandalous reputation ended up backfiring. This 2003 documentary *Living With Michael Jackson*, appeared as a feature special on British television and ABC. In part of the interview, Jackson holds the hand of an adolescent and discusses the fact that they sometimes share a bed. Just after the special aired, the boy who appeared in the film alleged abuse and "Jackson was charged with seven counts of child molestation and two counts of administering an intoxicating agent in relation to the boy."<sup>34</sup>

Ironically, Jackson's effort to be better understood and more widely accepted via participation in this project resulted in the opposite effect: not only generating more material for tabloid coverage, but leading to criminal charges. These charges and the British produced television special are the key antecedents to the VH1 film. Both events are prominently featured in *Man in the Mirror* which, remarkably, was conceived, created, and aired within a year of their occurrence. Much like Jackson's own songs, this tele-film works via the presentation of a split self. Jackson is portrayed as scandalously out of control and as a great talent who was also a victim. Before turning to a close analysis of the film and its reception, it is worth considering the biographical film (or biopic) as a genre.

The biopic stands as one of the most popular but least analyzed Hollywood genres. Custen, in one of few biopic studies, restricts his attention to films which portray "a historical person" with their "real name."<sup>35</sup> While this is a broad definition, he clarifies that this is a product of the wide variation that the genre has accommodated: "Other than this trait the definition of what constitutes a biopic— and with it, what counts as fame— shifts anew with each generation."<sup>36</sup> Custen notes the wide variation of biographical subjects and the tenor of their treatment, from the biopic as "hagiography," to "headliners (good or bad)," to the increased treatment "entertainers themselves."<sup>37</sup>

The emergence of television shifts the balance in the biopic's typical treatment of their star subjects. Mary Desjardins notes that "Contemporary biopics associate authenticity with knowledge of scandal."<sup>38</sup> Custen correlates this shift of emphasis with television's increased use of biographical programming: "TV biopics would, for the most part, focus on the seedy or

pathological angle of fame, leaving Hollywood with its increasingly outdated and unhip 'great man' approach."<sup>39</sup> I agree with Custen's claim that the biopic increasingly became a television genre characterized by "pathography."<sup>40</sup> I disagree with his conclusion that its movement toward scandal and television makes the genre less important or less worthy of critical attention.

Instead of dismissing the biopic's turn away from the "great man" film, the increasing presentation of the split subject offers a way of understanding our investment in consuming stars and celebrities. Jackson's story, which features even more exaggerated contrast between dysfunction and massive popularity, is a case-in-point film for the genre as a whole— as every biopic (to a certain extent) relies upon a selectively presented, split subject whose goodness, badness, or potential for both is exaggerated for dramatic effect.

If critics of the biopic have noted how part of the genre's appeal lies in the spectator's identification with the lead's desires, this has been shortly explained and undertheorized. Dennis Bingham concludes the 2010 study *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* with this observation:

We would love to imagine our own lives in story form, wouldn't we, ourselves as the subjects of our own biopics? Perhaps in cultures that most celebrate a myth of the individual, biopics are devoutly to be desired, for the same reasons that any hint of conventional generic form is deplored.<sup>41</sup>

As Bingham indicates, the biopic's contradictory valuation is matched by the social anxiety that attends the "myth of the individual." Richard Dyer has also addressed the maintenance of an ideology of the "individual" through star studies. He writes that stars "articulate both the promise and the difficulty that the notion of individuality presents for all of us who live by it. 'The individual' is

a way of thinking and feeling about the discrete human person, including oneself, as a separate and coherent entity."<sup>42</sup> While ideas of freedom and meritocracy remain dominant values in capitalist societies, "a necessary fiction for the reproduction of the kind of society we live in," Dyer emphasizes that maintenance of this discourse is always incomplete and emotionally fraught: "Stars articulate these ideas of personhood, in large measure shoring up the notion of the individual but also at times registering doubts and anxieties attendant on it."<sup>43</sup> In this study, I combine both approaches, studying both the construction of celebrity, and the biographical film genre as primary sites where we work out the problems of the individual.

The presentation of a split subject, such as Jackson, both threatens and appeals to the spectator due to unconscious identification. We are compelled by such a vision of the outermost possibilities of our being— someone both much greater and more able than ourselves, and someone much more shameful and abject, as well. How is this duality expressed, more specifically, by the film? Few viewers, save the most invested Jackson fans or followers, would describe *Man in the Mirror* as a good film. It is a bewildering, restless depiction that moves rapidly among many of the high and low points of Jackson's career. The production values are middling, the script is merely sufficient, and the acting as is fair. In nearly every textual dimension, *Man in the Mirror* exemplifies a film that was rushed through production in order to capitalize on the timeliness of its subject. Yet, curiously, the same features that make it flimsy and inconsistent are the same aspects that also make the film especially open— to a diversity of interpretations and audience interests.

Jackson stands out as such a divisive public figure—adored and worshipped by some, lampooned and reviled by others, with an added vigor on both sides proportionate to his status as a superstar. Thus, the existence of a split-spectatorship, which producers could anticipate and cater to, is fully plausible here. Splitting in this telefilm finds two dominant levels of expression: in both the style and content. First, the visual style displays a restlessness that underscores the instability of meaning or reading in the story. Second, the most controversial aspects of the musician's life story (his relationships with young children and his use of plastic surgery to alter his skin-tone) are included in the narrative. Yet, the restless perspective of *Man in the Mirror* can be understood as working for its audience at a deeper level than pleasing both those who wish to see Jackson celebrated and those who wish to see him shamed. Similar to the diva narrative, Jackson's story appeals to the consumer equally and unconsciously invested in the star figure's success *and* failure.

The film's opening scene frames the narrative in terms of the victimist discourse that increasingly defined Jackson's musical output and public appearances in the latter half of his career. Following a montage of Jackson memorabilia, we see a young Jackson sitting forlornly on a stoop, watching children play baseball. An eerie instrumental track accompanies the scene, as Michael (Flex Alexander) reports in the voiceover: "By the age of 13, I had four number one hits with my brothers, the Jackson Five." This apparent triumph, fitting the melancholy music, is read with a sense of resignation and defeat. His father suddenly appears in the doorway and berates him for taking this short break. He continues, "I was already one of the most famous people in the world, but my father and Motown had even bigger plans." We see the young Michael

trying to sleep but disturbed by a nightmare. The pops and flashes of press quality cameras disturb him, followed by a vision of Diana Ross as a kind of fairy godmother. She gives him a bizarre and incoherent message: “Michael, it’s me, Diana. You are going to be a big star. But there will be hurt and pain. Always. Follow your heart. Follow your heart.” This contradictory and anxious message is, paradoxically, accompanied by propulsive, synthetic drums, which lend a sense of purpose and certainty. The tone of the scene shifts towards a more definite resolution when Jackson wakes up from this vision to shadows on his wall: profiles of himself as a confident adult entertainer, striking a number of his signature poses. Thus, we have another compressed version of the movement between the split versions of Jacksons— from the abject, abused-abuser who seeks our pity (as encouraged by tearful appearances on Oprah or his appeal in “Childhood”) to the defiant entertainer who fully believes in his greatness and his right to follow his creative fantasies.

Quickly, though, the film turns dark again. An abrupt edit carries us to a contemporary Jackson concert. A series of rapid jump cuts within the same concert is overlaid by the roar of an airplane engine. After just a few seconds of his on-stage performance, we rapidly transition to Jackson off-stage— which, more than his music or his performance style, is the true subject of most biopics. A hysterical mob of fans rush Jackson, who can barely make it to his limousine. The scene not only features screaming, hysterical fans, but is closely framed and rapidly edited. While the affect of the scene is threatening and claustrophobic, Jackson is blasé and unaffected by the crushing crowd. After escaping to the privacy of his car, the singer muses dreamily about his commitment to his craft and the connection he has with his fans.

Jackson: I need a smoother transition for the last number.

Ziggy: What, are you nuts? You see what's happening out there? It was an amazing show, they love you! As long as they keep buying the albums, we love them!

Jackson: It's not about the money, Ziggy.

Ziggy: Everything's about the money, Mike.

Jackson: Not for me, or for them. I sing for them and they cheer for me. It's about love.

[A blonde woman slams herself against the car]

Ziggy: [laughs] I guess sometimes love hurts.

This conversation between Jackson and his manager concisely expresses the star's pathological commitment to stardom, and his misrecognition of the nature of this connection. The "love" between fan and star is, really, the desire for consumption (as Ziggy tries to remind Jackson), and one that will never find satisfaction (as illustrated by the masochistic fan). Where this phenomenon succeeds as commerce, it fails to satisfy. In an elaboration of the "superego paradox," Slavoj Žižek usefully differentiates the relationship between desire as it is expressed in consumerism as opposed to love. The consumer economy propels desire by sustaining the idea that

'the more you buy, the more you have to spend'): that is to say, of the paradox which is the very opposite of the paradox of love where, as Juliet put it . . . 'the more I give, the more I have'. The key to this disturbance, of course, is the surplus-enjoyment, the *objet petit a*, which exists (or, rather, persists) in a kind of curved space – the nearer you get to it, the more it eludes your grasp (or the more you possess it, the greater the lack).<sup>44</sup>

This is precisely the slippage that Jackson fails to recognize by mistaking his production of the self-as-consumer-product for a self that is comfortably loved or resolved.



*Man in the Mirror* continues to counterbalance detractors and supporters, highlighting the different ways in which this individual can be read. Consider the scene in which investigators follow up on a search warrant of Jackson's Neverland Ranch: The arrival of police cars at the Jackson property accompanied by a danceable rap song about being "busted." A quick series of jump cuts hurries the progress of the police. This rhythmic sequence positions the viewer to read the sequence lightly, as an outsider bemused by Jackson's deepening problems. At the same time, small details also encourage us to sympathize with him more. The introduction of this scene also includes two rapid panning shots from within the Jackson residence. These shots both position us, implicitly, in the Jackson camp, looking outside at the police invading his home, while also using a style of MTV editing that has a markedly different effect. While the unnecessary jump cuts suggest lightness and excitement, rapid pans are simply dizzying and disorienting. Thus, in just these few seconds of the film, we can tease out aspects of *Man in the Mirror* visual design that caters to a diversity of perspectives regarding Jackson. As the scene continues, this portrayal continues to broadly target the mass audience through diverse, contradictory readings of the star subject.

As the investigative team makes their way through Neverland, they voice opposing readings of the location and Jackson's culpability. After a hand-held camera shakily takes in the first room in Jackson's mansion, littered with glitzy, entertaining objects, one cop comments in awe, "Wow," while another says skeptically, with a furrowed brow, "A grown man lives here?" The "wow" cop continues to admire Jackson's collection of toys and souvenirs. Smiling while he holds up a glittered glove, he comments, nostalgically, "Look at this! I had one of

these when I was little.” The credulous cop tries to dissuade the skeptical one when he reads off a series of children’s movies as questions: “*Cinderella? Snow White? Peter Pan?*” Though the credulous cop tries to say, “That’s nothing, that’s just kid’s stuff,” a superior officer is also skeptical. He concludes, “There could be child porn on these tapes, let’s check ‘em out.” Another cop also muses over a toy he enjoyed as a child, then another comments on “a complete wet bar with no alcohol.” In this way, the scene moves, comment by comment, between skepticism to credulity. Quickly, the scene moves forward to the cops meeting Manny, the boy whose allegations sparked the investigation. The most skeptical cop carries the conversation, asking, “Are you scared of us?” Manny says no, and cop replies, “Well that’s good because we’re on your side.” The boy responds, “I didn’t realize we were taking sides.”

Manny’s reply aptly describes the film’s dominant approach to Jackson and the scandal of child abuse. The ideal spectator to *Man in the Mirror* does not simply withhold judgment on the star subject, but both actively believes and does not believe in him. Jackson is at once the innocent, childlike, misunderstood subject (worthy of sympathy and understanding) while also the monster worthy of rejection and shame. The chaotic, contradictory organization of *Man in the Mirror*— which aims more to simply participate in and generate profit from the Jackson scandal than to deliver any kind of truth or meaning from it— also underscores this function of the film to provide for both readings of the star subject. The film is never interested in providing answers, but, merely, playing and evoking this state of in-between-ness.

The psychoanalytic term which accounts for this state (of both knowing something to be false while believing it in all the same) is disavowal. The primal

scene of disavowal, summarized by Freud, is the child's traumatic discovery of sexual difference. Christian Metz draws an analogy between the boy's disavowal of the mother's lack and the state of belief *and* disbelief that spectator's bring to the cinema:

Before this *unveiling of a lack* (we are already close to the cinematic signifier), the child... will have to double up its belief (another cinematic characteristic) and from then on forever hold two contradictory opinions... In other words, it will, perhaps definitively, retain its former belief *beneath* the new one, but it will also hold to its new perceptual observation while *disavowing* it on another level. Thus is established the lasting matrix, the affective prototype of all the splittings of belief...<sup>45</sup>

It is a natural extension of Metz's more broad analogy (and, indeed, one crucial to the more distracted, diffuse condition of television spectatorship) that the kind of "splittings of belief" that create the necessary conditions for cinematic spectatorship are also expressed in the textual specificity of individual works.

*Man in the Mirror* is unusually illustrative in this respect, presenting a star subject that is both elevated and denigrated. The film's skittish treatment of Jackson manages two opposed audience segments for the film: a fan audience which rejects the dominant criticisms of Jackson and a tabloid/celebrity culture audience who relishes in the faults and failings of star figures. These segments of the viewing audience represent the outermost spectrum of the potential consumers—those most invested in witnessing a romanticized, aggrandized portrayal of the star figure, and those who want to see him embarrassed, mocked, and exposed.

Jackson, undoubtedly noticing *Man in the Mirror's* investment in the

darker side of his celebrity image, issued a public statement disparaging the film. Shortly after the film aired, Jackson countered that

[*Man in the Mirror*] in no way, shape, or form, represents who we are as a family. It is unfortunate that for years, we have been targets of completely inaccurate and false portrayals. We have watched as we have been vilified and humiliated. I, personally, have suffered through many hurtful lies and references to me as 'Wacko Jacko' as well as the latest untruth about me fathering quadruplets. This is intolerable and must stop. ("Jackson Smashes Mirror")

Jackson misses how cooperative this film is with the contradictory personality defined by his own work. Much of *Man in the Mirror*, after all, relies on rather bare-bones dramatizations of media episodes which Jackson actively orchestrated: for instance, the baby incident from Germany and his participation in the *Living With Michael Jackson* documentary. Far from operating as an antagonist to Jackson, the VH1 film works within the same discourses that Jackson employs in his songs, videos, and cover art. *Man in the Mirror* negotiates a divided audience, interested in both celebrating and denigrating this star figure, just as Jackson generates a split reception by arguing with critics in song lyrics and presenting increasingly fantastical, aggrandized versions of himself. In the second half of the essay, I shift my focus from the VH1 biopic to a reading of Jackson's songs.

In "Man in the Mirror," a pop ballad and #1 single from the 1988 album *Bad*, Jackson narrates a moment of self-recognition. After seeing "kids in the street," the singer vows to improve himself and the world. The chorus repeats the following resolution: "I'm starting with the man in the mirror / I'm asking

him to change his ways.” While the song, lyrically, promises self-reflection, renewal, and a dedication to social service, Jackson’s singing style belies the claims stated in the lyrics. Backed with a synthetic, propulsive sound design, Jackson’s delivery of the song lines remain more pop than reflective. His staccato singing style gives the performance a driving appeal, but one that places it firmly in an exterior, entertaining, pop aesthetic. The singer eventually moves from lyrics with content, to a series of emphatic, trademark series of “Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!” drawing out an image of a reflective and private realization, and towards Jackson’s specific performance style.

Simon Frith provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between the star singer and particular songs in his repertoire. He writes the star’s song performance is “involved in a process of *double enactment*: they enact both a star personality (their image) and a song personality, the role that each lyric requires, and the pop star’s art is to keep both acts in play at once.”<sup>46</sup> In this case, the character invoked in “Man in the Mirror” stands more in conflict with Jackson’s star image in the late 1980s than in support of it. A critic in the a commemorative edition of *Time Magazine*, published just after the singer’s death, contrasts the self implied by the song versus the troubled star’s public image: “contains a fleeting glimpse of autobiography (“I’m starting with the man in the mirror / I’m asking him to change his ways.”) But by then, we knew better than to confuse the singer with the song.”<sup>47</sup> While this song tries to articulate a fresh start (Gotta make a change for once in my life / It’s gonna feel real good / Gonna make a difference / Gonna make it right), the breezy, naïve hopefulness of Jackson’s claim stands out much more clearly than its plausibility.

Starting with *Bad*, this sort of song, in which Jackson is his own primary point of reference, would increasingly characterize the singer's sporadic output in the latter half of his career. The 1988 album featured another single (more popular than "Man in the Mirror") which explicitly addresses tabloid coverage. In "Leave Me Alone," Jackson rebukes his critics for manufacturing his scandalous star image. ("I don't care what you talkin' 'bout baby / I don't care what you say . . . . Leave me alone / Stop it / Just stop doggin' me around") The lyrics of the song work, doubly, as the story of a break-up in addition to a representation of Jackson's tumultuous relationship with the press. A lavish music video clarifies this ambiguity, clearly emphasizing Jackson's life and management of his image (in opposition to the press) as the preferred meaning of the song.

In the surreal music video to "Leave Me Alone," Jackson moves through a stop-motion animated landscape. This universe is populated by carnival rides, humans with dog-heads, and mock-tabloid newspapers with headlines screaming about the latest Jackson scandal. Jackson rides merrily through this world in a miniature rocket ship wearing historical, aviator goggles and a miniature rocket ship.. In one particularly bizarre juxtaposition, an oversized torso of Jackson lies corpse-like in the background while a second version of the singer flies merrily along in his rocket ship in the foreground. The smaller, rocket-bound singer turns around to see the larger version of himself in the background and, facing us again, smiles more broadly while swaying happily back and forth... all the time claiming that he wants to be 'left alone.'

A differently imagined music video could have emphasized the more generic, end-of-a-love-affair meaning of the song. What if the video had a

parallel narrative played by actors or featured a more direct display of singing and dancing skills. (as in “Billie Jean”)? Either of these choices would have pitched Jackson’s work as a performance rather than an explicit revelation of personality. Instead, “Leave Me Alone” works in the very register it also rejects. He protests the tabloid’s coverage of him while, at the same time, he continues to relish the attention and produce another narrative that encourages consumption and investigation of his ‘true’ self. Thus, Jackson effectively performs and contributes to exactly the sort of the celebrity image that he claims to be working against.

After *Bad*, Jackson would continue to work in this vein, producing songs which increasingly drew on his attempts to respond to and recalibrate public perceptions of himself. His single/video “Black or White” from 1991 makes a plea for a trans-racial future. The video features a broad range of ordinary people of multiple races who are ‘morphed’ from one to another, while Jackson makes a bid for race as an outmoded social category. Though phrased at a social-level, this song is clearly intended to address criticism toward Jackson for lightening his skin via plastic surgery. Where Jackson is castigated for being racially in-between, “Black or White” envisions a future in which these distinctions are no longer so salient, and, thus wherein, Jackson’s in-between racial identity would be just as accepted as someone with a more normative racial appearance. As with “Leave Me Alone,” though, Jackson actively contributes to the very scandal that he later counterargues: how can he claim to believe in a trans-racial future when he is actively investing thousands of dollars and much of his valuable time into appearing more white?

The 1995 single “Scream,” again, addresses his frustration with the tabloid

press. The presence of Janet Jackson in this duet (a more forceful, even masculine performer than her brother) gives Jackson the necessary chutzpa to act more angry in both the video and song. At this point in his career, Jackson is frustrated that his attempts to tell his own story have not been adequately understood— “Tired of you tellin' the story your way / It's causin' confusion / You think it's okay”— and, again, expresses frustration at this “injustice”: “The lies are disgusting / So what does it mean / Kicking me down / I got to get up.”

His next single, “Childhood,” continues his management and presentation of his personal story and image. This was the first song of Jackson’s which openly asked for the public’s sympathy on the grounds that he is a wounded and troubled performer. In this ballad, Jackson asks for the adoration of fame as compensation for past abuse: “Before you judge me, try hard to love me, / The painful youth I've had / Have you seen my Childhood?” In exchange for this compensatory love, Jackson offers escapist entertainment of “fantastical stories to share / The dreams I would dare, watch me fly.” By this time, Jackson had publicly acknowledged his abusive childhood, most notably on an appearance on *Oprah Winfrey* in which he described his adult relationship with his father: “There were times when he'd come to see me, I'd get sick...I'd start to regurgitate. I'm sorry...Please don't be mad at me...But I do love him.”<sup>48</sup> Jackson’s description of his relationship with his father, here, is torn between opposing feelings: of sickness and of love, of anger and of fear. The lyrics of “Childhood” reflect a similar split feeling: of inadequacy and shame, on the one hand, but also entitlement and aggrandizement.

Of the songs I discuss, “Childhood” features the most frank admission of Jackson’s feelings of inadequacy and his ‘unintentional’ contribution to his



tabloid image. He admits that his persona is an attempt “to compensate” and “keep kidding around like a child.” While this opposition may be expected at the level of consumption, it is surprising to see how fully Jackson’s material is already invested in this split discourse. His songs effectively break down the distinction between textual and extratextual materials. While it would be more common to preserve a stronger degree of contrast between a star’s original materials and discussions of their persona and textual output in secondary forums (such as television appearances, magazine articles, or internet pages), in this case, Jackson is already so engaged in the kinds of discourse that so often define these secondary forums that this distinction does not hold. In the very songs and videos he produces, Jackson’s desire to be loved and understood as a good or great persona is set against the fear that he may be misunderstood as exactly the opposite: a freak, an outcast, someone unloved, who is covered by the press only for shame and mockery.<sup>49</sup>

Instead of accepting the inevitability of overvaluation and undervaluation that comes with celebrity status, Jackson tries in vain to manage the presentation of a split self so that he appears (and, by extension, understands and identifies himself) only in the most positive terms. His unusual biography brings into focus the ambivalence of the identifications he solicits. On the one hand, one can feel sympathy for the star and accept his desire for understanding as genuine and deserved: he was abused in his youth, he never had a chance for a normal childhood, etc. On the other hand, though, the ways he wishes to atone or compensate for this lack stand out as misguided and self-punishing. While Jackson wishes to be loved and accepted, wholly and unequivocally, by his fans, the kind of admiration that the mass audience can give a star is, by definition, an

investment that can only be made in selective terms. Since the fan is consuming what is only, after all, a carefully managed and packaged version (or image) of a self, this relationship is destined to be very partial.

Jackson misrecognizes the fact that the pursuit of this distanced, mediated adoration necessarily entails the production of the other half of the story that he wishes to prevent, manage, or disavow. This very desire (to be so fully 'loved' and accepted by millions of fans) ensures the perpetuation of the split sense of the self that Jackson seeks to reconcile by producing more and more mass mediated versions of himself and his story. Thus, Jackson condemns himself to reenact this very tension rather than resolve it. Judging by Jackson's persistent and increasing solicitations of pity, all the admiration and attention that the star attracted could not compensate for his sense of lack. The inability of fan-love to compensate for the star's inadequacies reveals the perverted nature of the symbolic exchange that Jackson promises himself and his fans. This exchange is stated in the starkest terms in "Childhood," where Jackson correlates his lack with his ability to create "fantastical stories to share" for his audience. Jackson's assumption of this sacrificial role is consistent with the pervert's resolution of desire. As Renata Salecl explains, "In contrast to the hysteric, the pervert readily assumes this role of sacrificing himself, i.e., of serving as the object-instrument that fills in the Other's lack" (247). The problem with this exchange is that the object that Jackson presents to his mass audience is predicated on a fictive construction: an illusion of wholeness that is (as the song lyrics attest) borne of instability and inadequacy.

"Childhood" and "Scream" would eventually be placed on the indulgently titled *HIStory: Past, Present, and Future. Book I* (1995). The cover art of this album

continues to display the traps of the exchange that Jackson offers himself and his fans.

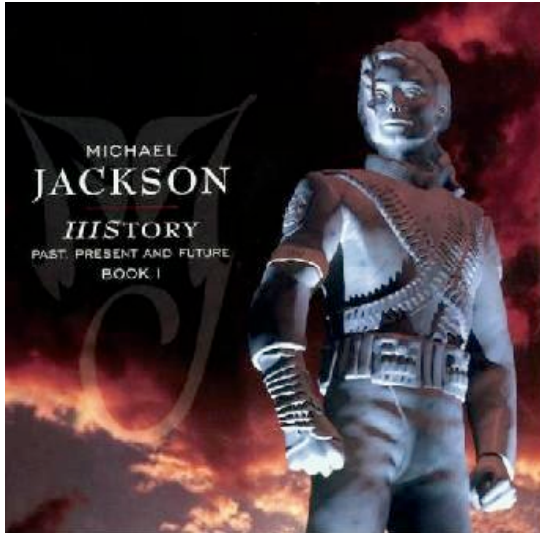


Figure 3. Jackson's *HIStory*: CD cover

Here, a statue of Jackson appears in front of a threatening, storm laden sky. This granite figure assumes a resilient, stable stance and is outfitted with ammunition strips across his chest and belt. The frail singer is represented, here, with greatly exaggerated musculature and an immovably confident cold stare. This representation as object evinces the logical end of desires expressed in songs such as "Childhood" and "Scream," where he longs to project a stoic, sufficient, and confident personae. The title of the album also registers these anxieties, as Jackson tries to regulate "*HIStory*" once again. The desire to contain "*Past, Present, and Future*" also represents an impossible desire to control and enclose something which is, ultimately, only present in being. The pretentious subtling

of the album "*Book I*" and the fact that there would never be a "*Book II*" indicate deferral or denial. Even this image of absolute sufficiency necessitates a clarifying comment that there is more to come. A second album, of course, would not resolve the ego's irresolution. Rather, the more that Jackson tries to fit this image of perfection, the more he will be haunted by lack, the constant need to reaffirm this false construction and be haunted by its inevitable insufficiency. The fact that his desire for sufficiency should find expression in a statue is telling. The stability of resolution that Jackson desires can only be had in the presentation of self as object.

Ironically, the false hope that Jackson sustains (to be fully accepted or understood) would short circuit the consumer cycle. While the singer's videos and songs evince a desire to be understood and accepted, they, instead, perpetuate a ritualistic enactment of misunderstanding and misrecognition. By providing numerous versions of a "split" self, Jackson encourages the audience to read him ambivalently. Thus, Jackson's own material works more in cooperation with both the tabloid, scandal-based media production about him than in opposition to it. Like the extratextual materials, Jackson profits from and encourages a divided reading of himself and his life story.

My analysis of *Man in the Mirror* positions this television biopic as a symptomatic cultural text that has much to teach us about popular investment in the scandalous celebrity. While some of this analysis is specific to Jackson's story, it also presents a useful, exaggerated case-in-point. The tendency of musical biopics to focus on the shameful half of the lead's life stories has been broadly typical of the this genre in the post-studio era, visible also in *Ray's* emphasis on the lead's drug problems and on Cash's alcoholism in *Walk the Line*.

Such portraits display the divided, contested nature of being that the ordinary subject does not allow himself to recognize in the everyday. By shaming star subjects and revealing the depth of their disavowal, we protect our insecurities. We are comforted seeing the struggles and insufficiencies of an Other.

### **The Death Drive in *I'm Not There***

In contrast to the representation of denial or disavowal in *Man in the Mirror*, *I'm Not There* portrays a star, Bob Dylan, who is unusually knowing and skillful in manipulating his life story and celebrity image. Both films dramatize the way that star consumption reveals the conflicted nature of subjectivity. Yet, where the Jackson film displays a considerable lack of consciousness, both on the part of its producers and its star subject, recognition defines *I'm Not There*. The Dylan film pairs a knowing celebrity with a knowing filmmaker

Todd Haynes, director of *I'm Not There*, has done more to legitimate the musical biopic than any other single figure. Like *A Hard Day's Night*, all three of his musical films work with this genre as a vital and innovative form while also referencing and revising the more staid elements of its history. Before the Dylan film, Haynes made the cult classic, Karen Carpenter, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), a thesis film made with Barbie Dolls, and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), a film which cribs its structure from *Citizen Kane* (1941) to reconstruct the rock biographies of characters resembling Marc Bolan, Iggy Pop, and David Bowie.

In an interview preceding the release of *I'm Not There*, Haynes is considerably aware of the biopic's typical "formula" and the way that this history informs his work:

I do see that there is a kind of form that has become common to film that we now call the bio-pic, but I don't know that it has any relationship to reality or anything literal or historical. It seems to be a construct of the narrative form that has to find beats in a person's life to dramatize events of the life that correspond to those moments of high and low and that have a relationship to their work. They are usually required to expose a certain amount of private history or conflict with drugs or philandering or something, and then show how that gets recovered or resolved. So to me, it's a formula, almost more nakedly so than other film genres because whatever the life is has to fit in this one package.<sup>50</sup>

As reflected in this statement, Haynes is well aware (and sympathetic to the fact that) many musical biopics have been rejected for rendering the lives of their historical subject too legible and too easily explained by a simplified compilation of a life's highlights and lowlights. Haynes aims to redress the tendency of biopics which analyze their protagonists so easily by making films in which the lead subject is much more difficult to know. *I'm Not There* portrays the process of representating an other or the self as always provisional and troublesome. Haynes's bewildering representation of biography-making veers precipitously close to Freud's take on the genre: "Whoever becomes a biographer takes on the obligation to lie, to cover up, to be hypocritical, to whitewash, and even to conceal his lack of understanding; for biographical truth cannot be had, and if one did have it, one could not use it."<sup>51</sup>

Haynes's great knowledge of and sensitive engagement with the biopic genre (as compared to the producers of *Man in the Mirror*) is also matched by Dylan's skillful management of his celebrity status and Jackson's clumsy and uncertain administration of the same. Where celebrityhood is a bargain that was unknown for Jackson (as a child-star), it is one that Dylan more fully

understands and controls. While Jackson aims to conceal or fully compensate for lack, Dylan, conversely, takes an inadequate sense of being as a given.

The differences between Jackson and Dylan's management of their star image is illustrated well by a comparison of their songs, "Leave Me Alone" with Dylan's "Ballad of a Thin Man" from *Highway 61 Revisited*. In both of these songs, the star rebuffs the media's investment in their story. In "Leave Me Alone" Jackson's desire for overvaluation and "love" contribute to the opposite reaction. Dylan, by contrast, remains masterfully in control of his management of the media and his star image in "Ballad of a Thin Man" from the 1967 album *Highway 61 Revisited*. The singer in this song taunts a critic's effort to understand his craft:

You walk into the room, with a pencil in your hand.  
 You see somebody naked and you say, who is that man?  
 You try so hard but you can't understand.  
 Just what you will say when you get home.  
 Cause something is happening here but you don't know what it is,  
 do you -- Mr. Jones?

Here, in the song's opening lines, Dylan subverts the usual power dynamic between the critic and the popular musician. Typically, the entertainer must (as an implicit part of the show business contract) offer himself up for public judgment – with newspaper and magazine critics figuring as the default arbiter's of popular taste.

In actual exchanges with the press, Dylan famously attempted to define this relationship otherwise, positioning himself in opposition to the popular critic's discourse. Dylan's stance was clearly defined in two charged interactions with the press in the 1960s. In 1963, a *Newsweek* expose reveals that much of Dylan's past is mythical, or a lie. This piece could have done significant damage

to Dylan, if his star image was defined by fact and authenticity. Instead, following the *Newsweek* piece, he openly granted the otherness of his interests. Loren Glass situates Dylan's response to this magazine piece as a turning point in his balanced construction of his status as celebrity *and* artist. He writes, "After Dylan's lies about his past were exposed in a 1963 *Newsweek* profile, he began to build a wall of semi-private and allusive language around himself, implying that his persona required not factual reportage, but literary interpretation."<sup>52</sup> A literary equivalent to "Ballad of a Thin Man" can be found in the "11 Outlined Epitaphs" of the liner notes of *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. Here, in a note addressed to "Mr. Magazine," Dylan self-presentation is markedly different than the journalistic model. He writes that:

the town I was born in holds no memories . . . mine  
is of another story for I do not care to be made an  
oddball bouncing past reporter's pens co-operating  
with questions aimed at eyes that want to see . . . I  
don't like to be stuck in print staring out at cavity  
minds who gobble chocolate candy bars.<sup>53</sup>

Here, Dylan positions himself outside the default relationship with the press. Rather than offer himself fully for consumption and judgment, Dylan rejects the validity of journalistic assessments and the neutrality of the consumer economy.

Dylan confronted the mainstream media again in the cinema-verité documentary *Don't Look Back* (1967). In one of the film's most famous scenes, he antagonizes an interviewer from *Time Magazine*. Instead of earnestly responding, Dylan questions the validity of *Time* as an objective source, and turns the focus to the interviewer. He argues, in short, that the reporter is merely a functionary in a ritualistic exchange. *Don't Look Back* is a broad-ranging film, in which Dylan's



clash with this reporter figures as the most concise and coherent dramatic conflict. *I'm Not There*, as I will outline shortly, could be described similarly.

Dylan positions the singer and his song above the critic in his performance of "Ballad of a Thin Man" as well. Beyond the clarity of his intentions in the lyrics cited above, his performance supports its rhetorical project. Dylan does this by skillfully performing crucial lines of the song: he laughs slightly while singing "you *try* so hard but you can't understand." He slows to a condescending crawl for last four words of every chorus— "Something is happening here but you don't know what it is, *do you, Mr. Jones?*" Here, Dylan taunts Mr. Jones with a slowness that does not make the critic's job any more easy or clear. Musically, "Ballad of a Thin Man" strikes a balance between ponderous and playful. The minor-key piano, the dominant instrument in the song, is severe, mimicking the critic's seriousness. Dylan effectively says, 'Even when I put something *on your level*, you still can't get it at all.' In contrast to the somber piano, the higher-key organ riff that accompanies the end of each verse-line is light, sounding almost improvisational. Dylan's vocal delivery, which is both commanding and casual, indicates his ability to masterfully hold both of these modes in dual-focus. He fully understands and can play around with the idea that a star-persona or a song can be deliberate and self-evidently meaningful, but ultimately rejects this possibility, favoring, instead, a mode of expression and self-understanding that remains elusive and ungraspable. Given such a similar thematic interest, "Ballad of a Thin Man" is, logically, featured in *I'm Not There*. It is the only song to receive a sequence akin to a music video.

Bruce Greenwood plays a character who encompasses 'Mr. Jones' and the actual self-serious reporters who Dylan clashed with in the mid-60s. In an

elaborate two-part sequence, Dylan (played by Cate Blanchett in this portion) clashes with 'Mr. Jones' during an attempted interview, then performs "Ballad of a Thin Man," at a concert that this critic attends. In the first half of this sequence, Jones attempts to conduct a conventional journalistic interview with Dylan, but finds him to be an unusually frustrating and slippery subject. Dylan persistently refuses to enact a conventional interview. Instead, he repeatedly denies any personal investment in his own work or the social world. When the interviewer asks Dylan to give a coherent stance of contemporary political movements, he refuses, saying, "I'm just a storyteller man, that's all I am." Dylan poses the heretical possibility that his folk music phase could be nothing more than "jumping into a scene" and "[doing] it better than anyone else." In other words, Dylan presents a version of himself and his work that is irreducible to the kind of stable and clear readings that inform journalistic discourse as well as conventional understandings of entertainment and being.

Dylan effectively gains control over this exchange, enclosing Mr. Jones with his deft negotiation of the terms of their exchange. To subtly underscore this point, Haynes inserts Dylan song lyrics for Jones' attempted retorts. When Jones protests Dylan's supposed lack of social concern, his response is drawn from the lyrics of a song from *Another Side of Bob Dylan*: "I don't believe you, you act as though—" Jones tries to hold to the conventions of journalistic discourse. He claims that Dylan's refusal to give him a straight answer reflects a lack of sincerity. Dylan retorts that he is "No more sincere than you are. You just want me to say what you want me to say," and effectively turns the questions to the interviewer. He asks Jones, "What do you care, if I care or don't care, what's it to you?" Dylan has effectively broken down Jones' confidence. In a revealing edit,

a reverse-shot of the interviewer is held for a relatively long period of time. Jones's penetrating gaze is interrupted and he casts his glance askew—feeling the grip of the typical interviewer's position slipping. Dylan has the last line before the scene shifts to a music video—positioned as a simulation of Jones's newly bewildered understanding of the critic-subject relationship. Dylan insists that “I know more about you than you will ever know about me.”

This encounter encapsulates the broadly different representation of the human subject in *I'm Not There* versus *Man in the Mirror*. In the Jackson film, the star's sincerity and desire to be loved position him at the mercy of his critics. Jackson's final mistake near the end of that film is the assumption that a documentarian who films him for a week will produce a flattering portrayal of him: of course, he does not. Dylan, by contrast, recognizes that the media wishes to transform him into a recognizable, easily digestible commodity. Extratextual material on celebrities typically follow a cycle of overvaluation then devaluation.<sup>54</sup> Where Jackson disavows this fact—hoping, indefinitely, that the media will be a forum through which he can reveal a true and good self after the “Wacko Jacko” persona had clearly taken hold. Dylan, by contrast, tries to extricate himself from being used in this way. He recognizes that assuming a sincere and needy position in an interview would put him in a vulnerable position. It would give the media a clear object to critique and allow them to use him as they may. Jones, naturally, can be read as a stand-in for the would-be audience member who also wishes to consume the celebrity without reflecting on the ritualistic function of this exchange—or for the consumer/critic's subject position in addition to the celebrity's.

The “Ballad of a Thin Man” video which follows this testy non-interview illustrates the overturning of the usual critic-celebrity dynamic. As cover of the song by Pavement’s Stephen Malkmus (which forgoes the teasing and subtle qualities of the original for a more raucous version) plays, while a surreal sequence, starring the critic follows: Jones walks into a restroom and is startled to encounter multiple versions of himself— the stability of his subject-position apparently unsettled by Dylan’s rebuke. He walks into a performance space and is confronted with a bizarre series of performers evoked in the lyrics of the song. A series of circus performers talk back to the critic, taunting his efforts to definitively understand them: “Here is your throat back, thanks for the loan ... “You’re a cow, give me some milk or else go home! ... There oughta be a law against you coming around. You should be made to wear earphones.”

What is at stake in the antagonistic relationship between Dylan and the press? “Ballad of a Thin Man” and the passage it inspired in *I’m Not There* present arguments through negation. A series of negatively stated positions emerge from this sequence of the film: Dylan does not want to be reduced to a commercial product. He does not want the media to set a limit in determining the meaning of his life or songs. He does not want to be bound by discourse which strictly associates facts with truth, but what is suggested in its place? *I’m Not There* portrays the very difficulty of imagining ways of being and meaning outside the norm. Subjectivity in *I’m Not There* is shifting, emerging, and unstable. To understand oneself in terms that significantly vary from the dominant modes is difficult and shattering. It is a kind of liberation, but also a kind of death.

*I'm Not There's* opening sequence presents a subject that is absent, multiple, elusive, and in the most daring portrayal, dead.<sup>55</sup> The film begins with a first-person point of view shot. This long-take in grainy-black-and-white aligns us with the perspective of an unseen music star. Roadies eagerly navigate the first-person point of view shot through backstage corridors as we hear crowd noise and musicians tuning their instruments. As the glare of the stage spotlights blinds our view, the scene suddenly shifts to another time and place. A motorcyclist starts his bike in two extreme close-ups before riding across the frame in a distant long take. Dylan fans will recognize this three-shot scene as an allusion to the singer's motorcycle accident in 1966. Had Dylan died in this accident, his cult-like status would have been solidified with a James Dean ending. Instead, exactly the opposite happened: few details of the accident or the extent of his injuries were ever known, the singer recovered and he withdrew from public life. Dylan did not tour for eight years, and his later musical output was less acclaimed. Though we know that he survived this accident, this scene is followed by an autopsy.

In this anachronistic scene, Blanchett as Dylan is examined by morticians then placed in a casket while a philosophic voice-over muses, "There he lies, a devouring public can now share the remains of his sickness." An examination lamp suddenly flashes on, filling the screen— suggesting a connection between this deathly white light and the glare of the stage lights (which we saw in the opening shot) or the flash-bulbs of press-photographers, which are depicted as equally domineering and intrusive later in the film. The narrator, then, introduces us to *I'm Not There's* primary conceit— that six different actors (none of whom bear a strong resemblance to Dylan or to the other five actors who play

him— including a woman and a young African-American boy) play the singer in the film. Each character is introduced with a terse past-tense description and a full-frame close-up that emphasizing their differences: “There he lay, poet, prophet, outlaw, fake. Star of electricity.” Voiceovers by Blanchett’s character (Jude) and Ben Whishaw (Arthur) emphasize the multiplicity of Dylan’s person and his work. Blanchett says, “A poem is like a naked person. Even the ghost was more than one person.” Arthur follows “But a song is something that walks by itself.” We return to all six characters are shown in an additional set of close-ups: cuts between characters are abruptly paired with a gun-shot, producing a strange effect of presence and non-presence.<sup>56</sup>

Each part of the opening sequence works in this manner, to portray the star as a ghostly, partial presence. The opening shot, which aligns us with a rock star taking stage suggests a plenitude of presence (this character is the center of the scene, worried over by his numerous handlers and cheered on by the crowd) but also an absence (we never see the character’s face or hear his music). The rock star, here, is an empty signifier that could, in this scene, be any rock star. The three-shot motorcycle scene taunts the spectator with the possibility that Dylan’s legend would be greater and more cinematic if he would have died at that moment. Instead, he ‘died’ a much slower and more complicated ‘death’, through six different guises. We are implicated, by the voiceover, as part of a “devouring public” that wishes, through the star, to consume another’s identity.

*I’m Not There*, from the start, promises to defamiliarize celebrity consumption. Typically, we are able to use celebrities to work through personal anxieties of selfhood. They are so firmly placed in the symbolic order because they allow us to unconsciously project feelings of both the aggrandized and the

devalued self onto these others. In the following description of the Lacanian fantasy's social function, note how well the work done by fantasy describes the work done by celebrities:

[Fantasies] are symbolic constructs or webs that shelter the subject from the trauma of loss of being (castration) requisite to becoming an 'I'. To use Lacan's words, fantasy is a scene presented to the imagination which veils 'a certain nonbeing upon which he raises up his being.' Against the conventional or typical understanding of fantasy as a scenario that enacts the realization or fulfillment of desire, then, Lacan pits a conception of fantasy as a kind of symbolic shield . . . from a primordial loss.<sup>57</sup>

As a kind of fantasy, the celebrity protects us from facing "lack" or the "Real." By modeling the greatness (or the deficiencies) of the individual, the celebrity protects us from facing the our own "nonbeing." The case of Jackson presents us with the limitations of aiming for too much certainty, sufficiency, and resolution through the presentation of an aggrandized star personality. As we saw, in this case, the maintenance of this illusion was destined to always be partial and temporary. I will briefly revisit Jackson as an example to help illustrate the kind of representations that are so clearly opposed by *I'm Not There*.

In the language of Communication Studies, celebrity consumption is better understood as ritualistic than informational communication. James Carey writes that "A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs."<sup>58</sup> Jackson attempts to manage and redefine the mass audience's understanding of him with each new song. The mass media and audience is also inclined to process

additional communications— as cumulative, as producing more meaning, or another chapter to the story. Yet, the continuities among his later production stand out far more than the minor differences between them. Rather than resolving any of the stark contrasts between the possible selves that Jackson embodies, his output only succeeds in dynamically representing this split as a ritualistic act of communication.

The sufficient self that Jackson performs is partial and fictive— a nostalgic longing for an essential and stable self that does not exist (fully or restfully) in any person, famous or anonymous. This essential self has been described by Freud as the “kernel of our being.” This concept was later taken up by Derrida to describe the elusive stability that we seek in language. Dominique Hecq describes the way that this “kernel” remains an unreachable destination that, ultimately, serves to reproduce desire:

[T]he kernel perhaps evokes the 'Kern unseres Wesen' - the 'kernel of our being' - that Freud refers to in his *Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1900: 145). For Derrida, this desire for the intact kernel is desire itself, which is to say that it is irreducible. Further, this desire for an intact kernel is a desire for a kernel, that has never been, to be intact. The kernel thus presents itself as a lack of kernel, an absence that would be best forgotten. In one word, the desire to retain this intact kernel is desire itself.<sup>59</sup>

The “desire for the intact kernel” is what motivates the consumerist exchange between Jackson and his fans, that must continue indefinitely to sustain itself. What is it that celebrity consumption protects us from?

In psychoanalysis, a group of interrelated terms (the real, *jouissance*, and the death drive) are used to account for the most terrifying and threatening



aspects of being: things which the subject is so motivated to avoid that they, like the head of Medusa, cannot be directly seen. In Lacan's formation of the "three orders" which structure our being and interpretation of the social world, the "real" constitutes the unseen aspect of social life which structures the "imaginary" and "symbolic" but can never be directly accessed. The "real" exists "outside language and [is] inassimilable to symbolization."<sup>60</sup> The "real" is not a sought after territory that we wish to encounter, but, the opposite, something which is scrupulously avoided by fantasy— investments in the imaginary and the symbolic. As Žižek explains, "fantasy serves as the screen that protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real."<sup>61</sup> The affect that accompanies encounters approaching the Real is *jouissance*. Lacan's translators leave *jouissance* in the original language to retain its ambivalence. *Jouissance* means not only enjoyment, but a surplus of enjoyment that the subject experiences as a threat. Stephen Heath defines *jouissance* as "a radically violent pleasure which shatters – dissipates, looses – that cultural identity, that ego."<sup>62</sup> Žižek describes *jouissance* as "a violent intrusion that brings more pain than pleasure."<sup>63</sup> *Jouissance* is what the subject seeks in Freud's formulation of repetition-compulsion and the death drive. As described by Copjec, he positions "repetition as the invariable characteristic of the drives that fuel life. The being of the drives, he claims, is the compulsion to repeat. The aim of life is not evolution but regression, or, in its most seemingly contradictory form, the aim of life is death."<sup>64</sup> The rational, humanist subject has little incentive to seek *jouissance* or the Real instead of happiness or self-improvement. The psychoanalytic subject, as described by Salecl, is partially driven towards its own negation and pain, "essentially marked by a force of self-annihilation, i.e. the death drive."<sup>65</sup>

Yet, the bare fact of the death drive is too much for us to face directly. The cultural valuation of “love-and-death pop idolatry,” fulfills the social function of making the death drive, *jouissance*, and the Real partially visible and accessible.<sup>66</sup> While characterizations of *jouissance* and the death drive bear remarkable resemblance to the pursuit of fame, these phenomena have rarely been considered together.

Consider how closely Copjec’s definition of the death drive’s motivation—“making oneself heard or making oneself seen”—resembles the pursuit of fame.<sup>67</sup> As in the celebrity condition, following a drive, “the intimate core of our being, no longer sheltered by sense, ceases to be supposed and suddenly becomes exposed.”<sup>68</sup> *Man in the Mirror* and *I’m Not There* portray the celebrity as a contradictory and chaotic state, resembling the psychoanalytic understanding of selfhood more generally. Beyond this commonality, the protagonists of these films respond to this condition differently: Dylan accepts and artfully plays with this aspect of celebrity status, while Jackson disavows it and goes on wishing for wholeness and coherence. These biopics, thematically, compliment Copjec’s redefinition of the filmic gaze, not as “an unrealizable ideal but . . . an impossible real.”<sup>69</sup> Understood in the context of the death drive, the popularity of the doomed rock star narrative makes considerably more sense. Without using psychoanalysis, Atkinson concisely describes the pop biopic in terms that are readily adaptable to this critical framework: “All modern pop biopics are by nature hagiographic, but, haunted by the ghost of Elvis, they are also inevitably tempted by the forces of darkness. The bitter destiny balances the music’s natural élan. And without the buoyancy of youthful privilege, the crashes, the ODs and asphyxiations would have no resonance.”<sup>70</sup> Yet, I do not discuss films

which end with the untimely death of their star protagonist (e.g., *La Bamba*, *The Buddy Holly Story*, *Sweet Dreams*, or *The Doors*). My choice of films about living pop stars is intentional. Though Jackson and Dylan were alive and well when these films were made, these biopics remain “haunted by the ghost of Elvis.” The death drive remains a structuring force in these portraits of aspiration to fame and celebrity consumption.

The portrayal of celebrity as catastrophe in these films can also be attributed to a dominant tone of mass entertainment in the television era. I have already summarized Custen’s claims about the biopic’s increasing portrayal of crises in the television era. Other critics have pitched this quality of television to the temporality of the medium itself. Since we never know when programming will cut away to breaking news of catastrophe, television always implies the possibility of disaster. Mary Ann Doane usefully contrasts the temporality of photography (which is taken as the foundational basis for much film theory) with that of television:

The principal gesture of photography would be that of embalming. In fixing or immobilizing its object, transforming the subject of its portraiture into dead matter, photography is always haunted by death and historicity. The temporal dimension of television, on the other hand, would seem to be that on an insistent “present-ness”—a “*This-is-going-on*” rather than a “*That-has-been*,” a celebration of the instantaneous.<sup>71</sup>

This kind of relationship with catastrophe and death informs *Man in the Mirror* and *I’m Not There*. Neither film works to memorialize a past hero. They do not appear interested in the function Bazin assigned to cinema: “embalming the dead.”<sup>72</sup> The cinematic investment in being and dying remain here, but in the

opposite direction: reproducing rather than allaying these anxieties. Where the photograph is more clearly funereal, as it promises the “continued existence of the corporeal body,” the television and now digital media are defined, instead, not by images but by an excess of images.<sup>73</sup> In this condition, where visual material is more ephemeral and disposable yet also infinitely accessible and available, the possibility of scandal and catastrophe haunts and informs this material.

Considering Bazin’s theorization of the photographic image in the current context, contemporary media are not (like early twentieth century media) resolutely “aimed against death.” They are, instead, restlessly aligned with the death drive— both shaking up and comforting its spectators by screening this drive at a safe distance. In this way, contemporary media (and the pop biopic, which I read as a privileged instance of the same) is aimed *with* death. From the beginning of *I’m Not There*, the film states a very clear analogy between celebrity and death. The kind of subjectivity that *I’m Not There* outlines is often bewildering and threatening, yet it offers a much more complex and complicated version of beings than is typically found in the biopic genre. While Jackson aims for a more foreclosed and controlled version of his star persona, *Man in the Mirror* demonstrates the impossibility of this desire. Jackson’s celebrity status, as much as Dylan’s, is defined by a kind of self-explosion akin to the death drive.

This reading of *Man and the Mirror* and *I’m Not There* ascribes a remarkably different function to the biopic than has been theorized before. Caroline Merz writes that “the contract of the biography the promise to deliver up a life; a biographer’s success or failure is judged on whether it creates a coherent personality.”<sup>74</sup> Bingham’s recent study of the biographical film assigns the genre

a much more literal and common-sense function: “The genre’s charge . . . is to enter the biographical subject into the pantheon of cultural mythology, one way or another, and to show why he or she belongs there.”<sup>75</sup>

In contrast to these theorizations of the biographical genre, the films I analyze present subjects that are incoherent and unmappable. Their identity and their cultural contributions are dynamically portrayed but uncertain. Since Jackson’s music is never heard in *Man in the Mirror* and most of the songs in *I’m Not There* are covers, their artistic production is ambiguously represented. The relative absence of the stars’ own music underscores the ritualistic consumption of star personalities— whose particularity is, ultimately, incidental— as the social function of the biopic.

The apparent incoherence of the stars featured in these films is better accounted for with the help of psychoanalytic theory. These unstable selves presented resonate deeply with the Lacanian view of subject formation. Where the “great man” biopic portrayed the heroic and assured subject, these contemporary biopics outline the traps that visibly attend the celebrity and more subtly guide or management of everyday living.

Other critical accounts of the biopic emphasize the genre’s ability to clarify and instruct the audience. (e.g., Merz and Bingham). I note, in contrast, a curiously muddled and ambivalent presentation of the star subjects of *Man in the Mirror* and *I’m Not There*. In the following account of representation’s social function, Lacan assigns a similarly ambivalent function to this process. He writes, “The effect of mimicry is camouflage in the strictly technical sense. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage

practiced in human warfare.”<sup>76</sup> Copjec explains: “At war both with its world and with itself, the subject becomes guilty of the very deceit it suspects.”<sup>77</sup> The function of representation in this view is not to present a clear version of a subject that appeals to the spectator by virtue of its simplicity, but the opposite: it proposes that ambivalent and unclear representations appeal to the subject because of the subject’s own unconscious sense of ambivalence and uncertainty. The contemporary musical biopic (often supposed to be the most self-evident and simplistic of film genres) appeals to a mass audience on these grounds—by the presentation of a conflicted version of the self—aggrandized, devalued, and inherently uncertain.

## CONCLUSION

A recent exchange in the popular press underscores how the biopic continues to be a genre of uncertain standing. A 2010 *Newsweek* feature titled “Are Biopics History?” suggests that the genre has grown stale, citing the poor performance of recent films, *Creation* (2009), *Amelia* (2009), and *Invictus* (2009). An article in *The Guardian* published a few months later points out that the *Newsweek* piece made scant mention of musical biopics and biographical films that were less mainstream. *The Guardian* counters *Newsweek*’s rejection of the with the counterclaim that “if you peer round the edges, it quickly becomes clear that the biopic is actually where the most radically minded, experimental filmmakers are setting up shop.”<sup>1</sup>

The musical biopic is an increasingly central part of this vexing genre—often celebrated as the site of some of the greatest film performances yet also dismissed as one of the least artistic film genres. In the preceding chapters, I surveyed four ways in which we can understand the post-studio era biopic more effectively. In devising these areas of focus, I hoped to circumvent the binary discourse that often frames popular talk about the biopic and musical biopic. Instead, I aimed to offer an account of the genre’s enduring popularity and significance.

In Chapter One, I focused on *A Hard Day’s Night*, analyzing how the film’s self-reflexive tendency continues the backstage musical’s tradition of “demystification and remystification” from the classical Hollywood musical. As such, I argued that the contemporary pop music biopic is linked to the earlier history of the classical Hollywood musical. While the musical biopic has

sometimes been cast off as a genre that violates the original music's integrity, I considered how discourses of authenticity wrongly guide understandings of both popular music and popular film. The musical biopic figures both popular music and popular film as codependent industries, belying the consumer fantasy that either medium can be conceived only in terms of itself. The musical biopic clearly portrays the entertainment industry as synergy-driven and multimediated.

In Chapter Two, I explored the cultural politics of the contemporary musical biopic, as reflected in the contemporary musical biopic's persistent attraction to African American entertainers. Where less than five percent of biographical films featured black subjects in the classical era (from the 1930s to the 1960s), this number has increased to more than twenty percent in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> I analyze the two dominant modes in which minority subjects have increasingly been featured: (a) films which tell the life-story of a black entertainer and (b) films featuring white musicians, in which an *Elvis* (2005) or Jerry Lee Lewis (*Great Balls of Fire!*) either openly express an interest in or appropriates black musicians and musical styles. I find that neither mode can be simply situated as progressive or regressive social representations. In films such as *Cadillac Records*, racism and the accomplishment of minority artists receive ambivalent portrayals that are difficult to judge, apart from noting their polysemic openness for many audience segments.

Chapter Three underscores the necessity of close formal analysis in genre studies. Via careful attention to the narrative motivation of song sequences, I demonstrated how contemporary musical biopics work within the structure of the classical Hollywood musical. In this chapter, by analyzing the development



of film style from the contemporary musical biopic to the classical Hollywood musical, I found that the most recent musical biopics (since the 2000s) reverse a tendency of “sobering” musical biopics of the 1970s and 80s.<sup>3</sup> *Ray*, *Walk the Line*, and *Beyond the Sea* emphasize the value of instantaneous expression over the tedious labor of songwriting. Where musical biopics of the 1970s and 80s such as *The Buddy Holly Story* or *Coal Miner’s Daughter* told tales of obligatory lives on the road, musical biopics of the 2000s treat musical performance as personal and expressive.

In Chapter Four, I considered the darker half of the genre’s attractions—to the protagonist’s death and to the lead subject’s failings and shortcomings. I positioned this analysis in terms of star studies and psychoanalysis, which provided effective frameworks for understanding the spectator’s attraction to these stories beyond the immediate contexts of American culture or the entertainment industry. In my readings of *Man in the Mirror* and *I’m Not There*, I conceived of spectators who “find special enjoyment in suffering.”<sup>4</sup> Using these examples as a case in point, I argued that fans negotiate understandings of stars via splitting, which allows them to work through the anxiety of being by elevating and denigrating these stars.

While, for the sake of clarity, I maintained my focus on a particular approach to the musical biopic within each chapter, in every case, I cover a dominant tendency which could be observed in numerous films in this genre. Take, for instance, the recent biopic, *Notorious* (2009), about the rap star the Notorious B.I.G. This film could have been discussed in any of my four chapters. It fits the interests of Chapters Two and Four in rather obvious ways, as a film about an African-American entertainer who died young. Appropriate to Chapter

Four's focus, Notorious B.I.G. is the twenty-first century's version of the hedonistic, self-destructive rock star—a celebrity who anticipated his own early death, agreeing to the star-contract which entails self-destruction as a very possible outcome of living so large and fast. As a black star, he also fits the ambivalent portrayals of the subjects of Chapter Two. *Notorious* positions its star as an admirable figure with extraordinary musical talent, charisma, and business acumen, but he is also portrayed as a womanizer and a misogynist. Hence, *Notorious* is both a progressive and stereotyped portrait of a black man. It is filmed in a style that I discuss at length in Chapter Three: “intensified continuity editing,” which absorbs potentially fragmenting jump cuts and unnecessary reframing shots. It also foregrounds, like *A Hard Day's Night*, the difficulty of absorbing a complicated life-story into a single feature film narrative. In some cases, *Notorious's* scriptwriters purposefully emphasize the contradictory identities that the lead performs: as one character prods the rap star, “I can't tell if you are a bad guy trying to be good, or a good guy trying to be bad.” A producer also instructs the young rap star to perform an identity that he no longer lives. He tells Biggie he must be “from the game but not in game.” At other points of *Notorious*, the film simply tries to absorb too many contradictory readings of the star persona: the star's eventual death is portrayed with a sentimentality out of step with the lead's steady contribution to the same, and his poor treatment of women is unconvincingly atoned for when he delivers an abrupt lesson to his daughter about the need to confront anyone who uses the word “bitch,” inspired by his calling another woman the same just seconds before.

This unintentionally bewildering portrait of the Notorious B.I.G. contains a variety of directions opened but not fully developed, suggesting that the musical biopic is defined by contradiction. It appears to be progressive and conservative. It seems deeply invested in the performing arts and interested only in the cult of celebrity. The musical biopic's openness is precisely what bothers so many spectators. These can, in fact, be frustratingly indeterminate features. A film like *Notorious* verges on a nearly incoherent portrait of its star subject; a major problem if we follow Caroline Merz's assertion that a biopic's "success or failure is judged on whether it creates a coherent personality."<sup>5</sup> I suspect that the clear presence of uncomfortable truths about the entertainment industry frustrates the musical biopic's critic at a deeper level than the semi-coherent character design. Especially in the cases where the portrait of the star subject fails or begins to break down, the musical biopic lays bare both the interdependence of contemporary entertainment and the essentially mediated quality of popular music and popular filmmaking. The musical biopic's multiple investments—not quite committed to filmmaking and not quite committed to popular music—force a recognition there is no form or medium which can simply be extracted from discussion in the context of the others. Ironically, critical rejections of the musical biopics often fall back on a falsely conceived protection of the innocence and separateness of popular music or filmmaking. As Jane Feuer has observed regarding musical films, and Simon Frith has argued in the context of popular music, discourses of authenticity and liveness persist in the face of the overwhelming evidence that the consumer is interacting with a mass produced, mediated object.

Consider Frith's account of the contradiction between the facts of popular music production and the discourse that governs consumption:

[Music] can now be heard anywhere; it is mobile across previous barriers of time and space; it becomes a commodity, a possession. And yet ideologically—as a matter of interpretation and fantasy—the old values remain (presence, performance, intensity, event), and listening to recorded music becomes contradictory: it is at once public and private, static and dynamic, an experience of both present and past. In the world of recordings there is a new valorization of 'the original.' It is as if the recording of music—its closeup effect—allows us to recreate, with even greater vividness, the 'art' and 'folk' experiences which the recording process itself destroys.<sup>6</sup>

This is the same process that Feuer finds at work in the textual appeals of the musical. In order to convince spectators of their authenticity, the musical (and, as I outline, the musical biopic), often works via "a pattern of demystification and remystification," to ultimately reinscribe the efficacy of the entertainment industry after taking spectators behind the scenes.<sup>7</sup> The ideal consumer of popular entertainment accepts the premise (which adorns MGM's logo in Latin, *Ars Gratia Artis*) of art for art's sake, and accepts the contract to experience music or film in a state of disavowal. We often pretend, for the duration of our consumption, that this is only art or entertainment, separable from the material contexts which enable its very consumption.

The maintenance of this illusion is what motivates the vehement rejection of the musical biopic. Those invested in popular music, and those invested in popular filmmaking both wish their media to be free of the corrupting influences of the musical biopic. Yet, this genre would not flourish if it did not work

effectively in the context of these entertainment industries. Like me, Dennis Bingham describes the biopic a remarkably fluid genre in his recent survey, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* He finds, that “neoclassical” biopics of the 2000s “synthesize, often quite smoothly, elements of the studio-era form, the warts-and-all film, and the deconstructive, investigative film.”<sup>8</sup> Similar to Bingham, I find a wide range of representational modes at play in the contemporary musical biopic. Each of my four chapters treats a different aspect of the contemporary musical biopic—reflexivity, racial politics, narrative and style, and negative appeal—for close analysis.

The musical biopic is the kind of genre which film studies has scrupulously avoided. With too few masterpieces, too many connections to other media, and a secondary relationship to its source material, the musical biopic offered little evidence of cinematic specificity. Given its apparent distance from an ideal object for cinema studies, it is remarkable how effectively long-standing methods of film study can be applied to this genre. Of the approaches I employ—social context in Chapter Two, film style and generic evolution in Chapter Three, and psychoanalytic theory in Chapter Four—only Chapter One’s emphasis on film’s relationship to the popular music industry and the multimedia context stands out as a somewhat unusual focus. Still, the familiar methods of film study that I employ are often not found together in the same work. Readers familiar with film scholarship will note the copresence of two modes of film study often presented as antagonistic methods. In my dissertation, I find both psychoanalytic film study (practiced most prominently by Slavoj Žižek) and close historical and textual analysis (practiced most

prominently by David Bordwell), to be particularly useful in explicating the enduring appeal of the musical biopic.<sup>9</sup>

### **Ideas for Future Research**

While questions of exclusion and inclusion have often dominated film genre projects, my study bypassed a broad-scale consideration of what should and should not be studied as a musical biopic.<sup>10</sup> Because the popular musical biopic is so understudied, I saw little reason to push its generic boundaries in this, the first extensive study of the genre. Thus, Custen's conservative definition of the biopic as a film's featuring the life "of a real person whose real name is used" was a perfectly useful means of clarifying the films included in my analysis.<sup>11</sup> Following Custen's definition usefully limits my corpus of texts, as this restrictive and clear explanation of biopic is virtually uncontested.

While I left off analyzing more distant variations on the musical biopic, such as *Purple Rain* or *Dreamgirls*, the musical biopic can be defined in a more expansive and inclusive manner, encompassing films which do not identify their source by name or feature a star musician playing a character resembling but other than himself. In hopes of encouraging work in this genre, beyond the scope of my project, I will briefly outline the work of other scholars in this area.

David Brackett, for instance, has identified a variation on the biopic he defines a "film à clef," as a film that "adapts aspects of the biopic's syntax and semantics, and even elements of a historical figure's life, into a film that is presented as fictional."<sup>12</sup> In this kind of film, a real-life performer is a probable point of reference for the majority of audience members, but is never explicitly identified by name. This generic designation could be applied to a wide range of

contemporary musical films: *Tender Mercies* (1983), in which the lead, “Mac’s performance style and biography resemble that of ‘hard country’ singers such as George Jones and Merle Haggard,” *Krush Groove* (1985) only changes hip hop producer, Russell Simmons to Walker in this thinly veiled biopic, *Grace of My Heart* (1996) is based on the life-story of Carole King, Todd Haynes’ *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), draws on the Marc Bolan, Iggy Pop and David Bowie, *Last Days* (2005), features a lead whose looks and story unmistakably invoke Kurt Cobain, and *Dreamgirls* (2006), bears close resemblance to the story of The Supremes. I eschew the responsibility, here, for establishing the connection between the biopic and these films more loosely associated with their source, but would welcome and encourage work on this variation elsewhere.

In the course of my dissertation research, numerous other potential avenues for research in the contemporary musical biopic appeared that I simply did not have the time or space to include in the present study. For instance, a more comprehensive account of the post-studio era musical biopic ought to account for rap music or hip hop as an increasingly frequent presence in this genre. In addition to *Notorious* (2009), Eminem starred in his own life-story in *8 Mile* (2002), a made-for-TV film told *Too Legit: The MC Hammer Story* (2001), and *Get Rich or Die Tryin’* (2005) starred rap star 50 Cent. Planned rap biopics include a film about Tupac Shakur and another profiling N.W.A. titled *Straight Outta Compton*.<sup>13</sup>

Biopics in which musicians play themselves or characters resembling their own lives are also increasingly produced. The fact that a Justin Bieber biopic has already been greenlighted for production and release by 2011 underscores the promotional function of this form, as well as the genre’s increasing tendency to

treat living, currently popular subjects.<sup>14</sup> The Bieber film can be grouped with other films also starring musicians in their own life-stories. I studied *A Hard Day's Night* extensively, as such, in Chapter One. Unfortunately, the achievement of *A Hard Day's Night* did not inspire similar efforts. The majority of musical biopics worked with actors playing musicians. Only the Spice Girls film *Spice World* (1997), 50 Cent's *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2005), and, soon, the 3D Justin Bieber biopic, can be added to the list of films in which star musicians play themselves. These titles fail to strike the subtle balance that *A Hard Day's Night* achieves. Where *The Beatles* film is able to function as a savvy, smart text that is also poppy, light, and fun, these other films are less inspired, limiting their audience to teenagers. Future studies of musical biopics which focus on the appearance on musicians would do well to expand the range of study to include films of likenesses in addition to themselves. In *Glitter* (2001), Mariah Carey appears as Billie Frank, in a lifestory resembling her own and Eminem appeared in *8 Mile* (2002) as Jimmy 'B-Rabbit' Smith. Prince stars in what is likely the most famous instance of the likeness-story, playing "The Kid" in *Purple Rain* (1984). The increase in production of films in which stars play themselves points to timeliness as an increasingly important element in the production of the musical biopics. In the classical era, the musical biopic was notable for its persistent investment in history and nostalgia. *Yankee Doodle Dandy* and *The Jolson Story* films, for instance, were produced well after the lead subject's height of popularity. The post studio-era musical biopic has been increasingly characterized by the timeliness of their portrayals. Just as George Bush was treated in Oliver Stone's *W* (2007) before he was even out of office, musical biopics increasingly treat stars of contemporary fame. Even a film like *Notorious*



(2009), whose lead subject had been dead less than fifteen years before the film's production, points to a shortened time-scale in than the classical era.

The production of international musical biopics has also increased in recent years. Britain, in particular, has seen an increase in musical biopics produced in and covering their native stars. The last few years has seen the production of *Control* (2007), *Telstar* (2008), *Nowhere Boy* (2009), and, most recently, *Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll* (2010). French subjects have also received recent treatments, with *Gainsbourg* (2010) in addition to *La Vie en Rose* (2007). Planned international biopics include, *Vysotsky: Thank God I'm Alive* (2011), about the Russian singer-songwriter Vladimir Vysotsky, a Steve McQueen film about Fela Kuti, and a Ram Gopal Varma film about the 1960s film star and singer Kishore Kumar.<sup>15</sup>

Numerous musical biopics are currently planned or in production. According to the Internet Movie Database, and other internet film sites, biopics about Ozzy Osbourne, Boy George, Peggy Lee, Janis Joplin, Miles Davis, Keith Moon, Sammy Davis Jr., Dusty Springfield, Kurt Cobain, Frank Sinatra, Rozz Williams, Aretha Franklin, Nina Simone, Marvin Gaye, Bob Marley, and Charley Pride are all, as of October 2010, planned or in a stage of production.<sup>16</sup>

This overwhelming list of the number of films currently in development underscores the enduring appeal of the musical biopic. While this genre has long been neglected by film studies, I have demonstrated that it deserves scholarly attention. Of all the subtypes of the musical biopic, post-studio era films focused on popular musical genres (such as rock, rap, country, pop) have inexplicably received the least attention of other films in this genre. A brief review of Appendix C, which lists the top grossing musical biopics from 1978-

present, confirms the importance of the subset I analyze, as eight of the top ten highest grossing musical biopics work in the most popular of musical genres. Like it or not, the popular musical biopic figures as an enduring film genre, one which we have much more to learn. I apply four areas of focus to my subject: (A) multimedia, promotion, and synergy, (B) ambivalent historical portrayals of minority stars, (C) close textual analysis of genre history, (D) and the fitness of psychoanalytic film theory in accounting for the biopic's late twentieth century turn towards scandalous and/or elusive protagonists. It is my hope that these modes of analysis will prove useful to future scholars working on this subject, and that they may also devise alternate modes of accounting for this long, unjustly overlooked film genre.

APPENDIX A  
 “STRUCTURAL MODEL OF THE MUSICAL BIOPIC”

In their study of musical biopics, Bruce Babington and Peter Williams Evans note four typical movements in plot development: rise, conflict and/or affliction, retirement and comeback; success and reconciliation. They write, “So formulaic is the ‘classical’ musical biopic that we can construct a model of it – an ideal meta-text which generates the real instances—as follows:

Movement A (Rise)

- i. The protagonist is marked out as exceptional
- ii. The protagonist risks all for success
- iii. The quest for success is shown to be more than materialistic
- iv. The protagonist endures a period of trial in which his talent is neglected.
- v. The protagonist falls in love and marries
- vi. The protagonist achieves success

Movement B (conflict and/or affliction)

- vii. The protagonist experiences a conflict between the demands of art and the demands of life which endangers marriage and/or the family.
- viii. The protagonist is afflicted in some other way

Movement C (retirement and comeback)

- ix. The protagonist retires or falls from the height of fame
- x. The protagonist makes a comeback

Movement D (success and reconciliation)

- xi. The protagonist re-achieves success
- xii. Life and art are reconciled

Babington and Evans, 120.

APPENDIX B  
POP MUSIC BIOPICS FROM 1964-2010

This list only includes films which meet the definition of the biography as a film in which the “real name” of the performer is used. As such, notable, nearly biography-like films such as *Last Days*, *8 Mile*, and *Dreamgirls* are excluded. This list also excludes biopics which treat classical musicians, such as *Immortal Beloved* and *Amadeus*.

Film	Musician / Musical genre
1. <i>A Hard Day's Night</i> (1964)	The Beatles / rock#
2. <i>Your Cheatin' Heart</i> (1964)	Hank Williams Sr. / country
3. <i>Funny Lady</i> (1968)	Fanny Brice / pop
4. <i>Lady Sings the Blues</i> (1972)	Billie Holiday / jazz
5. <i>Flame</i> (1974)	Slade / rock
6. <i>Funny Lady</i> (1975)	Fanny Brice / misc
7. <i>Bound for Glory</i> (1976)	Woody Guthrie / folk
8. <i>Leadbelly</i> (1976)	Leadbelly / folk
9. <i>Scott Joplin</i> (1977)	Scott Joplin / jazz*
10. <i>American Hot Wax</i> (1978)	Alan Freed / rock
11. <i>The Buddy Holly Story</i> (1978)	Buddy Holly / rock
12. <i>Birth of The Beatles</i> (1979)	Beatles / rock*
13. <i>Elvis</i> (1979)	Elvis / rock*
14. <i>The Rose</i> (1979)	Janis Joplin / rock
15. <i>Coal Miner's Daughter</i> (1980)	Loretta Lynn / country
16. <i>The Rosemary Clooney Story</i> (1982)	Rosemary Clooney / pop*
17. <i>John and Yoko: A Love Story</i> (1985)	Lennon and Yoko Ono / rock*
18. <i>Sweet Dreams</i> (1985)	Patsy Cline / country
19. <i>Sid and Nancy</i> (1986)	Sid Vicious (Sex Pistols) / rock
20. <i>'Round Midnight</i> (1986)	Lester Young / jazz
21. <i>La Bamba</i> (1987)	Richie Valens / rock'n'roll
22. <i>Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story</i> (1987)	Karen Carpenter / pop
23. <i>Bird</i> (1988)	Charlie Parker / jazz
24. <i>The Karen Carpenter Story</i> (1989)	Karen Carpenter / pop*
25. <i>Great Balls of Fire!</i> (1989)	Jerry Lee Lewis / rock'n'roll
26. <i>Take Me Home</i> (1989)	John Denver / country*
27. <i>The Josephine Baker Story</i> (1990)	Josephine Baker / misc*
28. <i>The Doors</i> (1991)	The Doors / rock
29. <i>The Hours and the Times</i> (1991)	The Beatles / rock
30. <i>The Jacksons: An American Dream</i> (1992)	The Jacksons / pop*
31. <i>Sinatra</i> (1992)	Frank Sinatra / pop*
32. <i>What's Love Got to Do With It</i> (1993)	Tina Turner / soul
33. <i>Backbeat</i> (1994)	The Beatles / rock
34. <i>The Basketball Diaries</i> (1995)	Jim Carroll / rock
35. <i>Love Can Build a Bridge</i> (1995)	Judd sisters / country*
36. <i>Selena</i> (1997)	Selena / pop
37. <i>Spice World</i> (2001)	Spice Girls / pop#
38. <i>The Temptations</i> (1998)	The Temptations / soul*
39. <i>Why Do Fools Fall in Love</i> (1998)	Frankie Lymon / pop

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 40. <i>And the Beat Goes On</i> (1999)                  | Sonny and Cher / pop*                        |
| 41. <i>Topsy-Turvy</i> (1999)                           | Gilbert and Sullivan / misc                  |
| 42. <i>Elvis</i> (2000)                                 | Elvis / rock*                                |
| 43. <i>In His Life: The John Lennon Story</i>           | John Lennon / rock*                          |
| 44. <i>For Love or Country</i> (2000)                   | Arturo Sandoval / jazz*                      |
| 45. <i>Hendrix</i> (2000)                               | Jimi Hendrix / rock*                         |
| 46. <i>Little Richard</i> (2000)                        | Little Richard / rock*                       |
| 47. <i>Too Legit: The MC Hammer Story</i> (2001)        | M.C. Hammer / rap*                           |
| 48. <i>24 Hour Party People</i> (2002)                  | Factory Records (vars.) / rock               |
| 49. <i>De-Lovely</i> (2004)                             | Cole Porter / jazz                           |
| 50. <i>Beyond the Sea</i> (2004)                        | Bobby Darin / pop                            |
| 51. <i>Man in the Mirror</i> (2004)                     | Michael Jackson / pop*                       |
| 52. <i>Ray</i> (2004)                                   | Ray Charles / pop                            |
| 53. <i>Get Rich or Die Tryin'</i> (2005)                | 50 Cent / rap#                               |
| 54. <i>Walk the Line</i> (2005)                         | Johnny Cash / country                        |
| 55. <i>Stoned</i> (2005)                                | Brian Jones ( <i>Rolling Stones</i> ) / rock |
| 56. <i>El Cantante</i> (2006)                           | Hector Lavoe / misc                          |
| 57. <i>I'm Not There</i> (2007)                         | Bob Dylan / rock                             |
| 58. <i>Control</i> (2007)                               | Joy Division / rock                          |
| 59. <i>La Vie en Rose</i> (2007)                        | Edith Piaf / misc                            |
| 60. <i>Miss Marie Llyod</i> (2007)                      | Marie Llyod / pop*                           |
| 61. <i>Cadillac Records</i> (2008)                      | Chess Records (vars.) / blues                |
| 62. <i>Crazy</i> (2008)                                 | Hank Garland / country*                      |
| 63. <i>Telstar</i> (2008)                               | Joe Meek / pop                               |
| 64. <i>What We Do is Secret</i> (2008)                  | The Germs / punk                             |
| 65. <i>Who Do You Love</i> (2008)                       | Chess Records (vars.) / blues                |
| 66. <i>Notorious</i> (2009)                             | Notorious B.I.G. / rap                       |
| 67. <i>Nowhere Boy</i> (2009)                           | John Lennon / rock                           |
| 68. <i>Oil City Confidential</i> (2009)                 | Dr. Feelgood / rock                          |
| 69. <i>Gainsbourg</i> (2010)                            | Serge Gainsbourg / pop                       |
| 70. <i>Lennon Naked</i> (2010)                          | John Lennon / rock*                          |
| 71. <i>Louis</i> (2010)                                 | Louis Armstrong / jazz                       |
| 72. <i>The Runaways</i> (2010)                          | The Runaways / rock                          |
| 73. <i>Sex &amp; Drugs &amp; Rock &amp; Roll</i> (2010) | Ian Drury / rock                             |

Key: \* = television movie; # = the star musician plays himself

APPENDIX C  
TOP-GROSSING MUSICAL BIOPICS FROM 1978-PRESENT

“Biopic – Music Movies at the Box Office,” *Box Office Mojo*  
<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=musicbio.htm>  
 Accessed 16 September 2010

	Title	Studio	Lifetime Gross / Theaters		Opening / Theaters		Date
1	Walk the Line (Johnny Cash & June Carter)	Fox	\$119,519,402	3,160	\$22,347,341	2,961	11/18/05
2	Ray (Ray Charles)	Uni.	\$75,331,600	2,474	\$20,039,730	2,006	10/29/04
3	Coal Miner's Daughter (Loretta Lynn)	Uni.	\$67,182,787	-	\$3,366,443	437	3/7/80
4	La Bamba (Ritchie Valens)	Col.	\$54,215,416	1,251	\$5,651,990	1,251	7/24/87
5	Amadeus (Mozart)	Orion	\$51,973,029	802	\$505,276	25	9/21/84
6	What's Love Got to Do with It (Tina Turner)	BV	\$39,100,956	1,100	\$1,222,718	58	6/11/93
7	Notorious (2009)	FoxS	\$36,843,682	1,641	\$20,497,596	1,638	1/16/09
8	Shine (David Helfgott)	FL	\$35,892,330	1,050	\$162,179	7	11/22/96
9	Selena (Selena)	WB	\$35,281,794	1,873	\$11,615,722	1,850	3/21/97
10	The Doors (Jim Morrison)	TriS	\$34,416,893	1,236	\$9,151,800	840	3/1/91
11	The Soloist	P/DW	\$31,720,158	2,090	\$9,716,458	2,024	4/24/09
12	The Buddy	Col.	\$14,363,400	-	n/a	-	5/19/78

	Holly Story (Buddy Holly)						
13	Great Balls of Fire! (Jerry Lee Lewis)	Orion	\$13,741,060	1,417	\$3,807,986	1,417	6/30/89
14	De-Lovely (Cole Porter)	UA	\$13,456,633	410	\$292,963	16	7/2/04
15	Why Do Fools Fall in Love? (Frankie Lymon)	WB	\$12,461,773	1,377	\$3,946,382	1,369	8/28/98
16	La Vie en Rose (Edith Piaf)	PicH	\$10,301,706	178	\$179,848	8	6/8/07
17	Immortal Beloved (Beethoven)	Sony	\$9,914,409	463	\$120,108	4	12/16/94
18	Sweet Dreams (Patsy Cline)	TriS	\$9,085,049	778	\$2,161,284	778	10/4/85
19	Cadillac Records (Chess Records artists)	Sony	\$8,195,551	701	\$3,445,559	687	12/5/08
20	American Hot Wax (Alan Freed)	Par.	\$7,932,571	-	n/a	-	3/17/78
21	El Cantante (Hector Lavoe)	PicH	\$7,556,712	542	\$3,202,035	542	8/3/07
22	Beyond the Sea (Bobby Darin)	Lions	\$6,318,709	383	\$45,264	6	12/17/04
23	Topsy-Turvy (Gilbert & Sullivan)	USA	\$6,208,548	224	\$31,387	2	12/15/99

24	Hilary and Jackie (Jacqueline du Pre)	Oct.	\$4,912,892	300	\$92,956	6	12/30/98
25	I'm Not There (Bob Dylan)	Wein.	\$4,017,609	149	\$730,819	130	11/21/07
26	The Runaways (The Runaways)	App.	\$3,573,673	244	\$805,115	244	3/19/10
27	Sid and Nancy (Sid Vicious)	Gold.	\$2,826,523	43	\$50,829	2	10/17/86
28	Backbeat (The Beatles)	Gram.	\$2,392,589	211	\$126,740	10	4/15/94
29	Bird (Charlie Parker)	WB	\$2,181,286	93	\$27,116	1	9/30/88
30	Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould (Glenn Gould)	Gold.	\$1,319,521	-	n/a	-	11/26/93
31	24 Hour Party People (Tony Wilson)	MGM	\$1,184,096	37	\$34,940	2	8/9/02
32	Control (Ian Curtis)	Wein.	\$872,252	29	\$27,674	1	10/10/07
33	What We Do Is Secret (The Germs)	PArch	\$58,776	7	\$5,888	1	8/8/08
34	Stoned (Brian Jones)	Scre.	\$38,922	6	\$15,409	6	3/24/06



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jeff Smith, *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music* (New York: Columbia University Press), 47; 54. "Synergy" is an aspect of contemporary entertainment marketing that is known in the popular press as well. Consider the following cynical assessment of the musical biopic in *The Irish Times*: "Music biopics come complete with built-in soundtracks, and the familiarity of so many featured songs serves as an incentive for audiences to see those movies. It's all part of Hollywood synergy at a time when so many conglomerates count film studios and record companies among their assets. Which is why Don Cheadle received the green light from Song Pictures for his planned biopic of Miles Davis: Sony also owns Columbia Records, which holds the rights to the Davis music library. Viacom owns Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks as well as MTV, which is useful for cross-promotion, and MTV has its own film production division." "Sing fast, die young," *The Irish Times*, June 22, 2007. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/theticket/2007/0622/1181771558625.html> (accessed September 27, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> Marc Miller, "Of Tunes and Toons: The Movie Musical in the 1990s," in *Film Genre 2000*, ed. Wheeler W. Dixon (New York: SUNY Press, 2000), 46.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, a recent interview with Quentin Tarantino where he cites the biopic as his least favorite film genre. Tarantino, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, PBS, August 21, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 113

<sup>5</sup> Tom Gunning, *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (review) *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 3 (September 1999): 151.

<sup>6</sup> George Custen, "The Mechanical Life in the Age of Human Reproduction: American Biopics, 1961-1980" *Biography* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 141.

<sup>7</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 5-6. By sticking to a definition of the biopic as the film in which the name of a historical figure is used, I leave off analyzing a variation of the biopic known as a "film à clef." In this kind of film, a real-life performer is a probable point of reference for the majority of audience members, but is never explicitly identified by name. David Brackett defines a "film à clef," as a film that "adapts aspects of the biopic's syntax and semantics, and even elements of a historical figure's life, into a film that is presented as fictional."

Brackett, "Banjos, Biopics, and Compilation Scores: The Movies Go Country," *American Music* 19, no. 3 (2001): 265.

<sup>8</sup> These films do not meet Custen's definition of a biopic, as *Purple Rain* stars a musician in a story similar to, but not identified as, his own while the narrative of *Dreamgirls* clearly resembles the story of the Supremes, but is never clearly stated.

<sup>9</sup> John C. Tibbetts, *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 110.

<sup>10</sup> See Mike Chopra-Gant, *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America*. *Box Office Mojo* confirms this discrepancy in the present day: where the highest grossing "neo-noir," *Sin City* earned \$74 million, the most profitable musical biopic, *Walk the Line*, returned \$119.5 million. "Genres" *Box Office Mojo* <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/> (accessed September 16, 2010)

<sup>11</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 33.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Dunne, *American Film Musical Themes and Forms* (London: McFarland, 2004), 173.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>14</sup> Rosalind Galt, "Pretty: Film Theory, Aesthetics, and the History of the Troublesome Image," *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 2 (2009): 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 4.

<sup>17</sup> James M. Collins, "The Musical," in *Handbook of American Film Genres*, ed. Wes D. Gehring (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 269.

<sup>18</sup> Altman, 235.

<sup>19</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>24</sup> See Custen, "The Mechanical Life," 141.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>26</sup> Carolyn Anderson, "Biographical Film," in Gehring, 334.

<sup>27</sup> A.O. Scott. "Film Review; A French Songbird's Life in Chronological Disorder." *New York Times*, June 8, 2007  
<http://movies.nytimes.com/2007/06/08/movies/08vie.html>  
 (accessed September 16, 2010)

<sup>28</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> George Custen, "Making History," in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 79.

<sup>30</sup> Danny Leigh, "The Music Biopics I'd Love to See," *The Guardian*, January 29, 2010 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2010/jan/29/music-biopics> (accessed September 16, 2010); Mike Householder, "Franklin Wants Berry to portray her in biopic," *AP* (Google) September 11, 2010 <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5jo5TXnd8ThK1LtoZA7RgKqFAZJoQD9I59FD02> (accessed September 16, 2010)

<sup>31</sup> Joshua Clover, "Based on Actual Events," *Film Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2008): 8.

<sup>32</sup> Angela McRobbie, "Dance and Social Fantasy," in *Gender and Generation*, eds. --- and Mica Nava (London: Macmillan, 1984), 150.

<sup>33</sup> See Richard Maltby, "'Nobody knows everything': post-classical historiographies and Consolidated entertainment," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (New York: Routledge, 1998), 21-44.

<sup>34</sup> Altman, "Whither Film Studies (in a Post-Film Studies World)?" *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 135.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>36</sup> Biopics, which foreground star performances so frequently, often work as 'promotional star texts.' In Richard Dyer's words, this kind of media texts participates in "the deliberate creation/manufacture of a particular image or image-context for a particular star." Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), 60.

<sup>37</sup> Barry Keith Grant, introduction to *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. --- (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), xv.

<sup>38</sup> "A distinction also needs to be made between institutionally recognized subgenres, cycles, and categories (operetta and the singing Western) and theoretical or scholarly classifications (the fairy tale musical, the show musical, and the folk musical)." Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre," in Grant, 166. Neale refers to Altman's *The American Film Musical* here. To take a more contemporary example, David Martin-Jones, *Scotland: Global Cinema, Genres, Modes and Identities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) includes both genre types: comedy, melodrama, the gangster film, and the horror film are "institutionally recognized" while Martin-Jones could well be the first critic to study Loch Ness monster films, Bollywood films set in Scotland, and American films about female friendship set in Scotland as generically grouped texts.

<sup>39</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 58.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Schatz, "The Structural Influence: New Directions in Film Genre Study," in Grant, 100.

## Chapter One

<sup>1</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, 50.

<sup>2</sup> Altman, *Film/Genre*, 23.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Babington and Peter Williams Evans. *Blue Skies and Silver Linings: Aspects of the Hollywood Musical* (Dover, NH: Manchester University Press, 1985), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), 43. Feuer also discusses *Singin' in the Rain* in these terms: "We regress from

an expose of romantic duets to an example of a romantic duet, which, along with all the others, lies about its past. *Singin' in the Rain* remains, rhetorically at least, the product of magic." Ibid., 47.

<sup>7</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 254.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>9</sup> Tibbetts, 83.

<sup>10</sup> The *Cahiers du Cinema* piece on *Young Mr. Lincoln* is the first and most important work on the relationship between the biopic and ideology. This film, according to the Cahiers critics works by "the repression of politics by morality," constantly emphasizing the universal and the ideological in the guise of the historical. Thus, by this reading, the particularity of Lincoln's story is incidental next to its representation of "The Law." "John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*: A Collective Text by the Editors of Cahiers Du Cinema," in *Movies and Methods*. Vol. 1., ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 508.

<sup>11</sup> This context represents a significant point of departure from many other musical biopics, which typically work in the mode of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), in which the musical prodigy's enthusiasm for popular music is questioned by his religious and traditional family.

<sup>12</sup> Tibbetts, 92.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 129-130.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, 333.

<sup>16</sup> Babington and Evans, 120.

<sup>17</sup> "[T]he studio promised anyone wary of elitist 'classical music' that Chopin's music consisted of 'all-time hit tunes' that were not at all 'highbrow'. Although their original titles might be unfamiliar, viewers were assured they are better known 'under the titles of popular tin pan alley song hits of today and yesterday.' Chopin was thus positioned as a proto-pop songwriter, 'who has furnished the basic melodies for more modern and popular song writers than any music-maker in history.'" Tibbetts, 86.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 129-30.

<sup>19</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 253.

<sup>20</sup> Babington and Evans, 138.

<sup>21</sup> See Thomas Elsaesser, "Film as Social History: The Dieterle/Warner Brothers Biopic," *Wide Angle* 8, no. 2 (1986): 15-22.

<sup>22</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Molly Brost, "Mining the Past: Performing Authenticity in the Country Music Biopic" (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2008), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Tibbetts, 102-103.

<sup>25</sup> R. Serge Denisoff and William D. Romanowski, *Risky Business: Rock in Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991), 13.

<sup>26</sup> "Movie studios, reeling from television, began in mid-1954 a marketing technique called 'two-way promotion,' The 'gimmick' as *Billboard's* June Bundy called it, was for a 'top artist to record the title tune from a new movie to be used as a prologue to or background for the film.' In turn, 'the disk is expected to release the record at the very same time.'" Ibid., 10.

<sup>27</sup> Custen, 29.

<sup>28</sup> See Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 330-385.

<sup>29</sup> See Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002) and Jane Gaines, ed., *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

<sup>30</sup> Babington and Evans, 55.

<sup>31</sup> In addition to the Jolson films, the titles I count here are *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), *Night and Day* (1946), *Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946), *The Fabulous Dorseys* (1947), *Words and Music* (1948), *Three Little Words* (1950), *Young Man with a Horn* (1950), *With a Song in My Heart* (1952), *The Glenn Miller Story* (1953), *Deep in My Heart* (1954), *Love Me or Leave Me* (1955), *The Benny Goodman Story* (1955), *The Helen Morgan Story* (1957), and *The Five Pennies* (1959), and *The Gene Krupa Story* (1960).

- <sup>32</sup> As George Custen reminds us, the decline of any particular genre in the 1960s and 1970s (in this case, the biopic) also reflects an industry-wide period of retrenchment. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 141.
- <sup>33</sup> Andrew Sarris, "Bravo Beatles!" *Village Voice*, August 27, 1964, 13. Reprinted in David Brackett, ed., *The Pop, Rock, & Soul Reader* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2005), 174-176.
- <sup>34</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 55-60.
- <sup>35</sup> Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 4.
- <sup>36</sup> Michael Atkinson, "Long Black Limousine: Pop Biopics," in *Celluloid Jukebox: Popular Music and Movies Since the 1950s*, eds. Jonathan Romney and Adrian Wootton (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 31.
- <sup>37</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, "Same as it Ever Was? Rock Culture. Same as it Ever Was! Rock Theory," in *Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth*, eds. Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonnell (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 112.
- <sup>38</sup> Quoted in Stephen Watts, "The Beatles' 'Hard Day's Night'," *New York Times*, 26 April 1964, sec. 2: 13, as quoted in Denisoff & Romanowski, 130.
- <sup>39</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, "The Media Economy of Rock Culture: Cinema, Postmodernity and Authenticity," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, eds. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin, and --- (New York: Routledge, 1993), 206.
- <sup>40</sup> Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 74-75.
- <sup>41</sup> Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (Routledge: New York, 1999), 64.
- <sup>42</sup> As Simon Frith reminds us, we would do well to consider concert attendance in terms of other standardized aspects of popular music consumption: "The commercial music world is also organized around particular sorts of musical events— events (such as promotional concerts and discos) which offer a kind of routinized transcendence, which sell 'fun'. Fun is an escape from the daily grind (which is what makes it pleasurable) but is, on the other hand, integrated with its rhythms—the rhythms of work and play, production and consumption." Simon Frith, *Performing Rites* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 41-42.

<sup>43</sup> An obvious conclusion to draw from the emphasis of live concerts and films on personality is that the recording figured as the arena where the fan accesses music-as-sound. This is partially true, of course, but it is also the case that every record came with, at minimum, a cover image which fit the band's image, and often supplementary materials or a large "gatefold" image. Philip Auslander, for instance, notes the important work that the posters included with the ironically titled *White Album* did in authenticating the desired image of The Beatles in the late 60s: "Whereas it was possible at the moment of rock's emergence in 1964 for The Beatles to be a credible rock group while wearing identical 'mop-top' haircuts, tailored suits, and 'Beatle boots' in photographs, including those on their record covers, that was no longer possible by the psychedelic era. Hence, the inclusion of pictures of the long-haired and bearded Beatles packaged with the so-called *White Album* (1968)." Auslander, 75.

<sup>44</sup> Auslander, 54.

<sup>45</sup> Feuer, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Corey Creekmur, "The Space of Recording: The Production of Popular Music as Spectacle," *Wide Angle* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 35-36.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> Altman, 170

<sup>49</sup> Joshua Clover, "Based on Actual Events," *Film Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2008): 9.

<sup>50</sup> Glenn D. Smith Jr. "Love as Redemption: The American Dream Myth and the Celebrity Biopic," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 33, no. 3 (July 2009): 231.

<sup>51</sup> Clover, "Based on Actual Events," 9.

<sup>52</sup> See Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, *The Film Experience* (London: Bedford, 2004) and Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson.

<sup>53</sup> Clover, "Based on Actual Events," 9.

<sup>54</sup> Though I do not have the space here to analyze this aspect of *A Hard Day's Night* in terms of its predecessors, the representation of the industrial production of sheet music and records has been portrayed in the classical musical – albeit at a much less consistent rate. See, for instance, *Lady Be Good* (1941).

<sup>55</sup> Steve Jones, *Rock Formation: Music, Technology, and Mass Communication* (London: Sage, 1992), 1.



<sup>56</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944; repr., London: Verso, 1997), 120.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>58</sup> See, for instance, Mariana Mogilevich, "Charlie's Pussy Cats," *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2002): 38-44; Richard Maltby, "'Nobody knows everything': post-classical historiographies and consolidated entertainment," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (New York: Routledge, 1998), 21-44; and Yvonne Tasker, "Approaches to the New Hollywood," in *Cultural Studies and Communications*, eds. James Curran, David Morely, and Valerie Walkerdine (London: Arnold, 1996), 213-228.

<sup>59</sup> See Denisoff and Romanowski, 10-11, and Denisoff and Plasketes. "Synergy in 1980s Film and Music: Formula for Success or Industry Mythology?" *Film History* 4, no. 3 (1990): 257-276.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Schatz, "The Structural Influence: New Directions in Film Genre Study," in Grant, 100.

<sup>61</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (Routledge: New York, 1998), 179.

<sup>62</sup> Custen, 74.

<sup>63</sup> Collins, 278.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Tasker attributes the emphasis on film as an 'event' to the emergence of the "multimedia marketplace," where films sell not only themselves but numerous other tie in or spin-off products. These products can't be fully separated from the film since they extend the "entertainment experience." See Tasker, "Approaches to the New Hollywood."

<sup>66</sup> See Tino Balio, "Retrenchment, Reappraisal, and Reorganization, 1948—" in *The American Film Industry*, ed. --- (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 401-448.

<sup>67</sup> See Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: the Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002.

<sup>68</sup> See Denisoff and Romanowski, 2-3.

<sup>69</sup> Marc Miller cites the failures of numerous late 1960s musicals, against the success of only two in the decade— *My Fair Lady* (1964) and *The Sound of Music* (1964)— as evidence of the genre’s ailing status. While the 1964 films did very well, all the big-budget musicals that followed were expensive failures. Miller, 45.

<sup>70</sup> The best summary of the film industry’s attempts to incorporate rock music in popular cinema can be found in Denisoff and Romanowski.

<sup>71</sup> Denisoff and Romanowski, 138.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>74</sup> Custen, 29.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

## Notes: Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup> See Mark Harris, *Pictures at a Revolution* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 52-57, on the promotion of a 1950s Sidney Poitier film, *Lilies of the Field* as groundbreaking, “a beacon of tolerance and cross-cultural understanding. . .”, when, next to on-going civil rights struggles on the streets and the popular press, it was a relatively timid, consensus-seeker. Harris, 53.

<sup>2</sup> In George Custen’s study of American biographical films from 1927 to 1960, he reports that “There were only twelve films (4%) made about nonwhite North Americans [and only five of these treated African Americans].” Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 98; Carolyn Anderson and Jon Lupo, “Hollywood Lives : The State of the Bio-Pic at the Turn of the Century,” in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale, (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 93.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Cohan, ed. *Hollywood Musicals, The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 155.

<sup>4</sup> Custen, 98.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson and Lupo, "Hollywood Lives," 93.

<sup>6</sup> "In *Swanee River*, after listening to the chants of black slaves unloading a merchant ship, Foster rushes into a saloon to bang out "Oh! Susanna" on the piano." Tibbetts, 149. Krin Gabbard identifies the 1941 film *Birth of the Blues*, "in which the white child who grows up to become Bing Crosby can already improvise on his clarinet more expertly than the folk artists who provide music for cakewalking black on the levee" as another instance of this sort of film, in which the white lead "improves" upon the more primitive, improvisational performances of blacks. Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 78.

<sup>7</sup> In a 1988 survey of the biographical film genre, Carolyn Anderson notes that only two percent of biographical films feature African Americans, and 28% portray women. Anderson's sample of biographical films consists of over 200 American theatrical features made from 1929 to 1986. Anderson, 336; 331. In a study published fourteen years later, in 2002, Anderson and Jon Lupo find a "significant increase in biopics about people of color" as only 76 percent of biopics surveyed in the timespan from the mid 80s to the mid 2000s feature white protagonists. Anderson and Lupo, "Hollywood Lives," 92-93.

<sup>8</sup> My list excludes titles about jazz musicians, which have received significant attention from Krin Gabbard: *'Round Midnight* (1986), about Lester Young, and Clint Eastwood's Charlie Parker biopic, *Bird* (1988). In this chapter, I prioritize feature films above made for television features. Thus, *The Jacksons: An American Dream* (1992), *Hendrix* (2000), and *Little Richard* (2000), are not be analyzed. The most current information on the biopics in preproduction is drawn from on-line sources: "Spike Lee Plots James Brown Biopic Starring Wesley Snipes," *Rolling Stone: Rock & Roll Daily*, January 27, 2009  
<http://www.rollingstone.com/rockdaily/index.php/2009/01/27/spike-lee-plots-james-brown-biopic-starring-wesley-snipes/> (accessed May 23, 2009).  
 "Terrence Howard and Craig Brewer Re-Team for Charley Pride Biopic," *Ace Show Biz*, October 4, 2006,  
<http://www.aceshowbiz.com/news/view/00005494.html> (accessed May 23, 2009).  
 "Charley Pride - Pride Determined to Be Alive for Biopic," *Contact Music*, February 26, 2008,  
[http://www.contactmusic.com/news.nsf/article/pride%20determined%20to%20be%20alive%20for%20biopic\\_1060744](http://www.contactmusic.com/news.nsf/article/pride%20determined%20to%20be%20alive%20for%20biopic_1060744) (accessed May 23, 2009).  
 "Is The Miles Davis Biopic With Don Cheadle Getting a Little Closer to Reality?," *The Playlist*, <http://theplaylist.blogspot.com/2008/12/is-miles-david-biopic-with-don-cheadle.html> (accessed May 23, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> I would be remiss not to mention the occasional production of black-cast musicals, including both low-budget independent films such as *The Duke is Tops*

(1938), *Broken Strings* (1940), and Oscar Mischaux's *Ten Minutes to Live* (1932) to Hollywood productions such as Fox's *Carmen Jones* (1954), and the MGM films *Hallelujah!* (1929), and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943). For the most comprehensive study of these films, see Chapters 4 and 5 of Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 123-194.

<sup>10</sup> William R. Weaver, "St. Louis Blues," *Motion Picture Daily* (8 April 1958), quoted in Tibbetts, 147-148.

<sup>11</sup> Powe, "St. Louis Blues," *Variety*, April 8, 1958.

<sup>12</sup> Tibbetts, 146.

<sup>13</sup> Gabbard, 99.

<sup>14</sup> Tibbetts, 146.

<sup>15</sup> Gabbard, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Robert L. Carringer, *The Jazz Singer* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 27.

<sup>17</sup> A nightclub owner, who puts down Handy as a teetotaler, "that's all he does is think up songs and drink sarsaparilla," provides just nominal resistance.

<sup>18</sup> Gabbard, 246.

<sup>19</sup> "Special Event: *St. Louis Blues*," Turner Classic Movies, <http://www.tcm.com/thismonth/article.jsp?cid=121586&mainArticleId=156499> (accessed July 10, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Berry Gordy, "Featurette: Behind the Blues," *Lady Sings the Blues*, special ed. DVD, directed by Berry Gordy (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Home Entertainment, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> "Lady Sings the Blues," The Numbers, <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/1972/0LASB.php> (accessed July 14, 2008)

<sup>22</sup> High points of this cycle are a number of female-lead action pictures with Pam Grier or Tamara Dobson as the most frequent stars, and three *Shaft* films. These include *Coffy* (1973), *Foxy Brown* (1974), *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), *Shaft* (1971), *Shaft's Big Score* (1972), and *Shaft in Africa* (1973).

<sup>23</sup> Harris, 114.

<sup>24</sup> Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 248.

<sup>25</sup> Gary Storhoff, "'Strange Fruit': Lady Sings the Blues as a Crossover Film," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 107-108.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>27</sup> Steve Perry confirms that Berry Gordy's approach to cultural production was motivated primarily for profit: "[I]t is Nelson George who as most concisely defined what Gordy was reaching for from the beginning, and what his critics failed to understand: 'He was preaching success in 1963, not black success.'" Perry, "Ain't No Mountain High Enough: The Politics of Crossover," in *Facing the Music*, ed. Simon Frith (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 64.

<sup>28</sup> Storhoff, 105.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-110.

<sup>30</sup> See Smith Jr. and Carolyn Anderson and Jonathan Lupo, "Off-Hollywood Lives: Irony and Its Discontents in the Contemporary Biopic," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 106.

<sup>31</sup> Storhoff, 112.

<sup>32</sup> Pauline Kael, "Lady Sings the Blues," in *For Keeps* (New York: Dutton, 1994), 457-459.

<sup>33</sup> James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work: Essays* (New York: Delta, 2006), 110.

<sup>34</sup> CineFiles, "Paramount Pictures Press Kit: Leadbelly," University of California, [http://www.mip.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/cine\\_film\\_detail.pl/cine\\_img/?28753](http://www.mip.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/cine_film_detail.pl/cine_img/?28753) (accessed March 31, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> L. Roi Boyd, III. "Leadbelly Thirty Years Later: Exploring Gordon Parks as Auteur Through the Leadbelly Lens," *Black Camera* 21, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 18.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> "Leadbelly," *New West*, August 2, 1976, CineFiles, University of California, [http://www.mip.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/cine\\_film\\_detail.pl/cine\\_img/?28753](http://www.mip.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/cine_film_detail.pl/cine_img/?28753)

<sup>38</sup> Vincent Canby, "Leadbelly," *New York Times*, May 29, 1976.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Grossbard, "Leadbelly," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, CineFiles, University of California, [http://www.mip.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/cine\\_film\\_detail.pl/cine\\_img/?28753](http://www.mip.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/cine_film_detail.pl/cine_img/?28753)

<sup>40</sup> Custen makes this claim by likening Leo Lowenthal's work on "Biographies in Popular Magazines" to biopics. This quote is Custen's summary of Lowenthal's view on biography as it also applies to film biography. Custen, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Gabbard, 51.

<sup>42</sup> See Ed Guerrero, "The Black Image in Protective Custody: Hollywood's Biracial Buddy Films of the Eighties," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 237-246. Guerrero analyzes the retrogressive development of portrayals of African Americans from the 70s to the 80s.

<sup>43</sup> Gabbard, 70.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 71. The mentor relationship between a more passive black man and a more dangerous, destructive white youth in *Young Man with a Horn* parallels a prototypical relationship that occurs in many other Hollywood films, across numerous genres. For instance, Rex Ingram's performance as Hank Williams's mentor in his biopic treatment, *Your Cheatin' Heart* bears resemblance to his earlier role as the lonesome African-American Mose in the Frank Borzage noir *Moonrise* (1948). Here, Mose, who has come to terms with his life as a failure, provides counsel for the troubled, young, white protagonist, Danny (Dane Clark).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Fox's Darryl Zanuck advised that "actions had to be communicated to the audience in a telegraphic scene or two which served as an explanation of the forces that drove the person to achieve his or her unusual destiny." Custen, 18.

<sup>47</sup> Gabbard allows a similar possibility in reference to female country biopics: "There appear to be no films resembling *The Jazz Singer* that center on women, unless we include pictures such as *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980) and *Sweet Dreams* (1985) in which a lower-class, rural milieu might supply the heroines' ethnicity." This is merely an aside in *Jammin' at the Margins*, a text which, otherwise, makes little mention of country music. Gabbard, 38.

<sup>48</sup> David Brackett, "Banjos, Biopics, and Compilation Scores: The Movies Go Country," *American Music* 19, no. 3 (2001): 268.

<sup>49</sup> Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 54.

<sup>50</sup> See Guerrero; and Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: the Negro in American Film 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 113.

<sup>51</sup> As Guerrero describes the end of *Die Hard*, this character “makes a sacrifice to solve the White man’s problems.” Guerrero, 242.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Rogin, “Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice Author(s),” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 417.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 449.

<sup>54</sup> Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>55</sup> Audrey: Everything I’ve done. I am only doin’ it to better ourselves Hank: That’s exactly what’s wrong, Ms. Biggity of 1952. Time and place; when and where and who you are! I know exactly what’s goin’ on in the mind of yours. Hank, I know we started out as just a couple of poor kids from Alabama, but people change. Well they don’t! ... Who do you think the people come to hear, some slick haired fancy Dan from New York City? They come to hear one of their own, a poor boy from the country. Audrey: Is that why your records are selling so well in Detroit and in Los Angeles? Hank: Well that don’t make no difference. The point is, what I was, I am, and I always will be.

<sup>56</sup> Gabbard, 100.

<sup>57</sup> Carol Clover describes the film as “America’s favorite object lesson on giving credit where credit is due.” Clover, “Dancin’ in the Rain,” in Cohan, 157.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

<sup>59</sup> See Gabbard, 35-98. This chapter of *Jammin’ at the Margins* analyzes the white jazz biopic.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>61</sup> Eminem, “Without Me.” *The Eminem Show*, 2002.

<sup>62</sup> Gabbard writes that *The Jolson Story* “reassures the majority culture that its comfortable notions of entertainment in 1946 are right and inevitable.” Gabbard, 54.

<sup>63</sup> Clover, “Based on Actual Events,” 8.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Dunne devotes a significant amount of attention to the use of rock music in so-called “beach movies” of the early 1960s. See Dunne, 58-63.

<sup>65</sup> The nostalgic bent of the film—particularly its portrayal of extravagant and guiltless enjoyment of luxury American cars—was only enhanced by its uncanny timing with the economic crisis of 2008.

<sup>66</sup> Clover, “Based on Actual Events,” 8-9.

<sup>67</sup> Clover mischaracterizes the supposed absence of Elvis in the film, who appears twice, not once, in the film, and *is* discussed by characters in *Cadillac Records*, and inaccurately describes the African American performers in the film as more sexual than white figures, when Chess’s sexuality is a central focus of the film.

<sup>68</sup> Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1998), 48.

<sup>69</sup> Glenn Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock’n’roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 55, paraphrasing Chuck Berry, *The Autobiography* (New York: Harmony, 1987), 104; 110.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Dunne cites “Beach Blanket Bimbo from Outer Space” in his study of “beach movies” of the early 1960s. Dunne, 58-63. The full transcript of the SNL sketch is available at <http://snltranscripts.jt.org/78/78fbeach.phtml> (accessed April 14, 2009).

<sup>71</sup> Perry, 66.

<sup>72</sup> Emphasis in the original. Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock & Roll Music* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 155, as cited by Perry, 65.

<sup>73</sup> Altschuler’s description of Berry’s frustration with his contract confirms the historical basis for the scene in which Berry confronts Len for giving DJs and promoters a large percentage of their profits. See Altschuler, 55.

<sup>74</sup> Gabbard, 38.

<sup>75</sup> Knight, 91.

<sup>76</sup> 1968 Review from *Portland Oregonian*, as quoted in Doug McClelland, *Blackface to Blacklist: Al Jolson, Larry Parks, and “The Jolson Story”* (Langham MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 257.

<sup>77</sup> Gabbard, 54-55.



<sup>78</sup> See, for instance, the following popular magazine profiles: "Adrien Brody," *People*, 30 June 2003, 71 and "Adrien Brody: An Oscar Star is Born," *Rolling Stone*, 1 May 2003, 63.

<sup>79</sup> Renata Salecl, *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* (London: Verso, 2000), 23. To his talent, Chess offers the pleasure of accruing capital and fame. To Chess, his contact with these masculine black men, promises increased access to women and sexual mastery. Work this quote in: A sort of "Freudian primordial father who, as the possessor of all the women, also possesses all *jouissance* and thus blocks his sons' access to their *jouissance*." Fits the openness of the musical biopic, in which stars sing the originals?

<sup>80</sup> Ovie Sernhede, "Black Music and White Adolescence," in *Negotiating Identities: Essays on Immigration and Culture in Present-Day Europe*, eds. Aleksandra Alund and Raoul Granqvist (Atlanta, GA: Rodopoi, 1995), 190.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Screen It!, a site which tracks instances of sex, violence, and illegal behavior in popular films, reports that *Cadillac Records*'s script includes, "At least 78 'f' words (38 used with 'mother,'," a great many of these are dropped by Len, after successfully recruiting and establishing a friendly relationship with his roster of black talent. "Cadillac Records" *Screen It! Parental Review* [http://www.screenit.com/movies/2008/cadillac\\_records.html](http://www.screenit.com/movies/2008/cadillac_records.html) (accessed April 24, 2009); According to Robert Palmer's account of Chess's studio manner, the late 2000s film use of colorful language is verified by the oral history. An engineer who worked at the studio told Palmer, "With some of the blues players, the whole session would be Leonard and whoever it was calling each other stacks of motherfuckers." Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History of the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 162.

<sup>83</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 52.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>85</sup> Chess's use of these extravagant gifts as a way of conferring value on their relationship recalls the exchange of cigars in *Young Man With a Horn*. See Gabbard, 71. Dixon's voiceover makes the function of the lavish gift quite explicit: "Now, Leonard Chess didn't worry none about skin color. It was the color of them bills that mattered. Just get you enough green to cover yourself and then you ain't no Jew-boy no more, and you ain't no colored boy either. You're just a man, with a Cadillac."

<sup>86</sup> Custen, 4

<sup>87</sup> Babington and Evans, 226.

<sup>88</sup> Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 8.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>90</sup> See Ray, 326-360.

<sup>91</sup> Smith, *The Musical: Race, Gender, and Performance*, 116.

<sup>92</sup> In a reading of the film focused on Tina's dependence on Ike, and her eventual emancipation from him, Yvonne Tasker notes Tina's movement from blues to rock as emancipating, without calling into question the racial politics at work in this exchange: "[T]he film presents her new identity, or new found strength, in terms of music: Bassett/Turner telling her new manager she is interested in the energy of rock'n'roll rather than the 'blues.'" Tasker, *Working Girls*, 191.

<sup>93</sup> Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 329.

<sup>94</sup> Smith devotes a significant amount of attention to this triumphant conclusion, again, focusing on the gendered aspects of the scene at the expense of racial politics, missing the fact that this final, "emphatic celebration of the woman's emancipation" is also arrived at by way of capitulating to [or embracing] more mainstream, pop music. Smith, *The Musical: Race, Gender, and Performance*, 116.

<sup>95</sup> Alex Ross, "Rock 101: Academia Tunes in" *The New Yorker*, July 14 & 21, 2003. See also John J. Sheinbaum, "'Think about What You're Trying to Do to Me': Rock Historiography and the Construction of a Race-Based Dialectic," in *Rock Over the Edge*, eds. Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook, and Ben Saunders, 110-132. Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2002.

<sup>96</sup> Bell hooks, *Real to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge 1996), 112-113.

<sup>97</sup> Ray, 7.

<sup>98</sup> Steven Spielberg's adaptation of the Alice Walker novel, *The Color Purple* (1985) sparked a more prominent debate among the black community about the representation of black women *versus* black men. *What's Loves* portrait of a strong black woman is also arrived at, in large part, by way of a particularly evil black

man. A similar trade-off was also made in *The Color Purple*, arousing a dynamic debate amongst the African American audience about the cost/benefits of this mainstream portrayal of black family life. See Jacqueline Bobo, "Watching *The Color Purple*: Two Interviews" *The Film Cultures Reader*. Graham Turner, ed (London: Routledge, 2002): 444-468.

<sup>99</sup> Tibbetts, 110.

<sup>100</sup> Theodor Adorno, "The Curves of the Needle." 1965. Reprint. *October* 55 (1990b): 54.

<sup>101</sup> Feuer, 46.

<sup>102</sup> Babington and Evans, 226.

<sup>103</sup> Feuer, 36.

<sup>104</sup> Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman (London: BFI, 1981), 177.

<sup>105</sup> Writing about the "hard body" [male-lead action-adventure] films of the 1980s after other critics, most notably Susan Jeffords, had already defined dominant readings, Yvonne Tasker proposed an "account, rather than an 'explanation,' of both the pleasures and the political significance of these [action] films. Such an account might allow an attention to the complex ways in which popular cinema affirms gendered identities at the same time as it mobilizes identifications and desires which undermine the stability of such categories. These two modes are matched by the operations of much academic film criticism which seeks to politically pin down popular cinema at the same time as celebrating (selected) examples of its ambiguous plurality." Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 5.

### Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup> Dave Marsh, "Schlock around the Clock." *Film Comment* 14, no. 4 (July / August 1976): 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Ironically, where Marsh justifies his lack of attention to "musical films" with the explanation that they are too *different* to warrant study, inattention to the biopic has often been explained with the rationale that they evince too many similarities to warrant attention) an example: According to Mary Joannou and Steve McIntyre's summary of a conference on the topic, biopics usually focus on a "main character struggling against adversity, and overcoming it. In the biopic, the individual subject needs to remain within the ambit of the ordinary, while at

the same time the film is premised on the subject's extraordinariness . . . The biopic thus negotiates the tensions inherent in antinomies such as ordinary/special, destiny/circumstances, effort/talent, etc., negotiations which feed off and reflect wider cultural tensions." Biopics avoid "complex plotting," and, instead, focus on a "series of . . . particular problem(s)." Mary Joannou and Steve McIntyre, "Lust for Lives: Report from a Conference on the Biopic," *Screen* (April-May, 1983): 147.

<sup>3</sup> Joannou and McIntyre, 146-147.

<sup>4</sup> Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 200.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, "Vincente Minnelli," in Altman, *Genre: The Musical*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> J.P. Telotte, "A Sober Celebration: Song and Dance in the 'New' Musical," *Journal of Popular Film* 8, no.1 (Spring 1980): 2.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy E. Scheurer, "The Aesthetics of Form and Convention in the Movie Musical." *Journal of Popular Film* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1974): 308.

<sup>10</sup> Elsaesser, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Streisand, as quoted in Bingham, 259.

<sup>12</sup> Miller, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Bloch, "Review: The Buddy Holly Story." *Film Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (Autumn 1978): 45-46.

<sup>14</sup> The Patsy Cline biopic *Sweet Dreams* (1985) works similarly, with the lyrics of her music only occasionally associated with the content of her life. Her version of "Your Cheatin' Heart" plays as she embraces her new lover—formerly an affair but now her second husband. At other times, eyeline matches follow her husband, Charlie's point of view as he watches her perform. A case could be made that certain lines express his sentiment, but these matches happen so infrequently, and are accompanied by such generalized lyrical content—"If loving you means I'm weak, then I'm weak"—that they appear merely incidental.

<sup>15</sup> In *Applause* (1929), for instance, we understand that the exhilaration of the crowd is not felt by the performers. A crucial difference between the musical biopic and backstage musical, however, is that the backstage film involves a community of performers while the biopic centers on the singularity of the star's problems. Rick Altman devotes a sub-chapter to the backstage variety of musicals in *The American Film Musical*, 210-234.

<sup>16</sup> Cynthia A. Hanson, "The Hollywood Musical Biopic and the Regressive Performer," *Wide Angle* 10, no.2 (1988): 15-16.

<sup>17</sup> Cynthia Rose, "The Riddle of the Rock Biopic," *Sight and Sound* 3, no. 10 (October 1993): 15.

<sup>18</sup> Hanson, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Elsaesser, 15.

<sup>20</sup> John Mueller, "Fred Astaire and the Integrated Musical," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 1 (1984): 28-30.

<sup>21</sup> As Mueller points out, the history of the musical genre could well be described as "a quest for the ideally integrated musical" (28). Thus, the least integrative modes—one, in which "a performer steps out of character and comes forward to do a song," and two, in which song is used merely to "contribute to the spirit or them" are, in fact, rarely used in musicals, particularly since the 1930s. As the author points out, these methods of situating music applying more regularly to other genres, such as suspense films that use "supportive background music, more than the foregrounded performances of the musical genre. (38) I point this out to emphasize that even the third or fourth mode of integration on this scale or six qualifies as a relatively loose degree of integration for a musical or musical biopic.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson produce a similar valuation of what distinguishes the most accomplished films. In a discussion of how to properly evaluate *mise-en-scene*, they emphasize the cooperation between these formal elements and others. See Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*. Fifth edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997), 170-171.

- <sup>27</sup> Paul Filmer, Val Rimmer, and Dave Walsh, "Oklahoma!: Ideology and Politics in the Vernacular Tradition of the American Musical," *Popular Music* 18, no. 3 (October, 1999): 387.
- <sup>28</sup> Altman, *A Theory of Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 87.
- <sup>29</sup> Martin Rubin, "Busby Berkeley and the Backstage Musical," in Cohan, 55.
- <sup>30</sup> Babington and Evans, 55.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.
- <sup>33</sup> Rick Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, 180-181.
- <sup>34</sup> James M. Collins, "The Musical," in Gehring, 272.
- <sup>35</sup> Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflexive Musical," in Grant, 466.
- <sup>36</sup> Collins, 271.
- <sup>37</sup> Holly's final line of dialogue also supports this interpretation. Just before the performance stops in freeze-frame, with text relaying the details of his death, Holly, appropriately, says, "We love ya, we'll see you next year."
- <sup>38</sup> Gary Arnold, "Gary Busey Weighs in With a Winner." *The Washington Post*, August 18, 1978.
- <sup>39</sup> Elysa Gardner, "Stars who've carried a tune" *USA Today*, October 28, 2004.
- <sup>40</sup> Eve Zibart, "Imitating Buddy Holly," *The Washington Post*, August 19, 1978.
- <sup>41</sup> The *USA Today* article cited above writes that Spacek's "performance is still considered the platinum standard for pop biopics."
- <sup>42</sup> See Dennis Bingham, "'I Do Want to Live!': Female Voices, Male Discourse, and Hollywood Biopics" *Cinema Journal* 38, no.3 (1999): 3-26.
- <sup>43</sup> Loretta Lynn, *Still Woman Enough* (Hyperion: New York, 2002), x.
- <sup>44</sup> While the glamorousness of her cinematic personification boosted Lynn's personae, her gritty, long-suffering life-story would come to define a typical Spacek performance for years to come—as the actress moved away from affectless, unsettling performances (as in *Carrie*, *Three Women*, or *Badlands*): "Coal

*Miner's Daughter* rewrote Spacek's blank page with several years of "oppressed but indomitable" women, as one interview headlined them, during which she played women of noble suffering." Pat Dowell, "Sissy Spacek." *American Film* 15, no. 11 (August 1990): 28.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>46</sup> Gary Arnold, "Song of Survival: the Candid Saga of Loretta Lynn," *The Washington Post*, March 7, 1980.

<sup>47</sup> Feuer, "The Self-Reflexive Musical," in Grant, 457.

<sup>48</sup> Babington and Evans, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Feuer, 43.

<sup>51</sup> Babington and Evans, 55.

<sup>52</sup> Hanson, 15-16. Hanson's analysis focuses on *The Buddy Holly Story*, *La Bamba*, and *Sweet Dreams* (1985).

<sup>53</sup> This song, which closely matches the narrative events of the film, is never used in *Coal Miner's Daughter*.

<sup>54</sup> Elsaesser, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Loretta Lynn, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, 185.

<sup>56</sup> Rose, 15.

<sup>57</sup> Loretta Lynn, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, 92. "Everyone says all my songs are about myself. That's not completely true, because if I did all the things I wrote about, I wouldn't be here, I'd be all worn out in some old people's home. But I've seen things, and that's *almost* the same as doing 'em." She goes on to describe how the composition of "You Ain't Woman Enough (To Take My Man)" was inspired by a fan who, with a cheating husband, solicits Lynn's advice. Lynn claims to have replied with the song title, "Why she ain't woman enough to take your man! Just like that, as soon as I said it, I knew I had a hit song. She was all prepared to take a backseat because her husband feel for another woman. But that's not something I'd let myself do."

<sup>58</sup> Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," 189.

<sup>59</sup> Dyer points out that, as a narrative form, musicals can never be considered 'pure entertainment' or 'form'; stories always function ideologically. Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Babington and Evans, 122.

<sup>61</sup> Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 213.

<sup>62</sup> Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1999), 58

<sup>63</sup> Babington and Evans, 55.

<sup>64</sup> For more on the country music biopic, see Brackett and Brost, a recent dissertation on the performance of authenticity in country music biopics.

<sup>65</sup> Collins, 275.

<sup>66</sup> Feuer, 465.

<sup>67</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 236.

<sup>68</sup> Brian Michael Goss, "Spectacular Recuperation: Alex Cox's Sid and Nancy." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 24, no.2 (April 2000): 162.

<sup>69</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 75.

<sup>70</sup> John C. Tibbetts, "The Biopic in the Nazi Wartime Cinema" (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Film & History Conference, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, November 11–14, 2010).

<sup>71</sup> Angela McRobbie and Simon Frith, "Rock and Sexuality," in *Taking Popular Music Seriously*, ed. Simon Frith (London: Ashgate, 2007), 52.

<sup>72</sup> Denisoff and Romanowski, 122.

<sup>73</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 33.

<sup>74</sup> Anderson and Lupo, "Off-Hollywood Lives: Irony and Its Discontents in the Contemporary Biopic," 106.

<sup>75</sup> Babington and Evans, 55.

<sup>76</sup> Denisoff and Romanowski, 581-582.

<sup>77</sup> Goss, 163.



<sup>78</sup> Ibid. See Corrigan and White, 169, for more on “sound as counterpoint” as a formal technique.

<sup>79</sup> He writes, “the postclassical does not oppose the classical but emphatically re-centers it, precisely by making the marginal genres the dominant ones, pulling an unusual time structure, a novel sound practice or an expressive visual style into focus and dead center, without thereby neutralizing their unsettling aberrance.” “[It] alerts one to the possibility of different form, of audience engagement, different ways of being inside and outside when it comes to identification and participation.” Thomas Elsaesser, “Specularity and Engulfment: Francis Ford Coppola and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*” in Neale and Smith, 201; 197.

<sup>80</sup> Goss, 162.

<sup>81</sup> Jon Laderman, “Slip-sync: In/authenticity and performance in the punk musical film cycle, 1978-1986” (PhD diss., University of California, Davis, 2007), iii.

<sup>82</sup> Todd McCarthy, “Hard Alex,” *Film Comment* 22, no. 5 (September/October 1986): 38.

<sup>83</sup> Another film released the same year, David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* includes a handful of songs which are rather obviously and artfully lip-synched, underscoring how, since the late-70s, lip-synching has been couched as a campy, florid performance while actors-doing-the-singing had become the convention.

<sup>84</sup> The full quotes that I shortly cite are: “Punk rejected the idea of a moral center, of social or artistic context, of psychological motivation, but art requires all those things— in short, a sense that there’s a living, breathing filmmaker behind the film. In a metaphysical sense, the movie never ventures outside the hotel rooms where Sid and Nancy seem to spend all their time . . . the only thing that is sustained in *Sid and Nancy* is a tone of clinical disinterest that leaves you asking why Cox would want to make a movie about them . . . As Nancy shrieks and Sid blunders through some solo gigs and Nancy shrieks some more, the movie becomes a look at the slow (and rather dull) suicide of two addicts.” Paul Attanasio, “*Sid and Nancy*,” *Washington Post*. November 8, 1986.

<sup>85</sup> Ronald Bergan, “Whatever Happened to the Biopic?” *Film and Filming* 346 (July 1983): 21.

<sup>86</sup> Simon Callow, introduction to *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography*, by John C. Tibbetts (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), xi.

<sup>87</sup> Martin Walsh, "Political formations in the cinema of Jean-Marie Straub," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 4 (1974): 12-18.

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC04folder/Straub.html>

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. Here, Walsh quotes from Paul Schrader's review of *The Rise of Louis XIV* here. Walsh finds Schrader's characterization of that film so similar to his interpretation of *Chronicle* that he borrows Schrader's words. Paul Schrader, "The Rise of Louis XIV," *Cinema (U.S.A.)* 6, no. 3, 4.

<sup>90</sup> A radio works similarly in *Walk the Line*. The frustrations of Cash's first wife, a non-singer, are carried by radio songs. "I miss you already and you're not even gone," plays before Cash goes on tour again. "Time is slipping away" matches the stagnancy of their relationship.

<sup>91</sup> Strictly speaking, the shift from non-narrative to narrativized music happens 54 minutes into *Ray*. The total length is 152 minutes.

<sup>92</sup> "Baby Let Me Hold Your Hand," which plays over a montage of Ray meeting various women is the rare exception.

<sup>93</sup> Telotte, 2.

<sup>94</sup> Elsaesser, "Vincente Minnelli," 16.

<sup>95</sup> Corrigan and White, 66.

<sup>96</sup> David Bordwell, "Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film." *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 17.

<sup>97</sup> Telotte, 3.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>99</sup> Janet Maslin writes about *La Bamba*, "Films like these... are better admired for their innocence and simplicity than faulted for their lack of sophistication." In a review of *Walk the Line*, A.O. Scott, writes about the musical biopic as a middle-brow genre that has produced few great films but also few abysmal ones: "Movies based on the lives of popular musicians constitute a durable genre in Hollywood, and also a fairly safe one."

<sup>100</sup> Telotte, 2.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," 189.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Rose, 15.

<sup>105</sup> Smith Jr., 226.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>107</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 19.

<sup>108</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 19.

<sup>109</sup> *What's Love Got to Do With It*, covered in more detail in Chapter 2, is worth mentioning in this conversation. Like *Walk the Line*, it features a male-female pair of comparable fame at the level of the star-actor and the star-musician portrayed. Yet, *What's Love*, even with Laurence Fishburne's Ike Turner to Angela Bassett's Tina Turner, effectively abandons the dual-focus narrative that has dominated so many musicals and musical biopics. Susan Smith notes the uniqueness of this move as compared to a male-female pairing in a classical Hollywood musical, *The Pirate* (1948): "[W]here *What's Love* differs quite significantly from *The Pirate* is in its ability to contemplate a notion of gender freedom that neither involves the kind of collapse of sexual difference that seemed to occur in that earlier film's final number nor requires the woman's achievement to be subsumed into a wider celebration of the couple." Smith, *The Musical: Race, Gender, and Performance*, 112.

<sup>110</sup> Telotte, 13. See also Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 270.

<sup>111</sup> I've appropriated this phrase from Rick Altman, who argues, in contrast, that not just the film musical, but popular music in general since the 1960s has indubitably *lost* any "special, romantic, quasi-religious status" association with this form. Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 270.

<sup>112</sup> Altman, 363.

<sup>113</sup> Susan Smith provides a concise analysis of the differences between rock biopics and the musical. With *What's Love Got to Do With It* (1993) and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) as typical examples, she demonstrates how biopics emphasize the isolation of one or two performers, while musicals highlight communities. In both cases, of course, music is the catalyst that isolates the star singer or brings together the community. Smith, 108-109

<sup>114</sup> Smith Jr., 230-231.

<sup>115</sup> Altman, 270.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

## Chapter Four

<sup>1</sup> Adam Gopnik, "The In-Law: Willie Nelson Has a Song for Everyone," *The New Yorker*, October 7, 2002, 56-61. (accessed via ProQuest July 9, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Atkinson, 21; 24.

<sup>5</sup> Edgar Morin, *The Stars* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 131.

<sup>6</sup> In this way, the enduring stars are the ones who lives, already, resembled a biopic (which also compresses and exaggerates) a long life.

<sup>7</sup> "Star studies" texts include Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* (London: Routledge, 2004); Edgar Morin, *The Stars*; Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001); and P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). These authors all make short mention of psychoanalytic approaches to studying stars, but do not follow up on this suggestion in much detail.

<sup>8</sup> Copjec, 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>13</sup> Following Copjec's more subject-centered version of psychoanalytic film study, it logically follows to study the genre that attempts, most, to center the subject. The primacy of the "self" in these accounts points to the biopic as the ideal genre to study in this respect.

- <sup>14</sup> deCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 145.
- <sup>15</sup> Copjec, 34-35.
- <sup>16</sup> P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, 14.
- <sup>17</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 34.
- <sup>18</sup> Custen, "The Mechanical Life," 134
- <sup>19</sup> Mary Desjardins, "The Incredible Shrinking Star: Todd Haynes and the Case History of Karen Carpenter" *Camera Obscura* 19, no. 3 (2004): 34.
- <sup>20</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 214.
- <sup>21</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 232.
- <sup>22</sup> Custen, "The Mechanical Life," 148.
- <sup>23</sup> Bingham, 403.
- <sup>24</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 75.
- <sup>25</sup> Renata Salecl, *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* (London: Verso, 2000), 108.
- <sup>26</sup> Lacan, as quoted in Barbara A. Biesecker, "Rhetorical Studies and the 'New' Psychoanalysis: What's the Real Problem? Or Framing the Problem of the Real," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998): 224.
- <sup>27</sup> Copjec, 33.
- <sup>28</sup> "[T]he mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation—and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an "orthopedic" form of its totality—and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. Thus, the shattering of the *Innenwelt* to *Umwelt* gives rise to an inexhaustible squaring of the ego's audits." Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Ecrits: A Selection*. Bruce Fink, trans. (London: Norton, 2002), 97.

<sup>29</sup> The private self and the self seen in the mirror coordinate with the other dichotomies that define psychoanalysis: Superego and Id, Object and Lack, and Fantasy and the Real.

<sup>30</sup> Melissa Bradshaw, "Devouring the Diva: Martyrdom as Feminist Backlash in *The Rose*," *Camera Obscura* 21, no. 1 (2008): 71.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Compare Bradshaw's summary of the diva narrative to Babington and Evans' schematic summary of the musical biopic: Babington and Evans, 120.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Rosenstone, "In Praise of the Biopic," in *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film*, ed. Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>34</sup> J. Randy Taraborrelli, *Michael Jackson: The Magic, The Madness, The Whole Story, 1958-2009* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2009), 640.

<sup>35</sup> Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 5-6.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>38</sup> Desjardins, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Custen, "The Mechanical Life," 148.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>41</sup> Bingham, 403.

<sup>42</sup> Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 7.

<sup>43</sup> Dyer, 9.

<sup>44</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 23-24.

<sup>45</sup> Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), 70.

<sup>46</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 212.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Corliss, "Superstar: 1978-1989," *Time Magazine*, Special Commemorative Edition: Michael Jackson 1958-2009. July 2009, 30-43, 34. (accessed via Academic Search Elite June 18, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> Taraborrelli, 620.

<sup>49</sup> See Brook for a fuller account of splitting's place in psychology. He writes that splitting was first theorized by Freud in terms of Id, Ego, and Superego, but is more commonly applied in contemporary psychology as "the splitting of objects and affects into good objects (or part objects) of affection and bad objects of hostility." J.A. Brook, "Freud and Splitting," *The International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 19 (1992): 335.

<sup>50</sup> Sean Axmaker, "Todd Haynes and a Whole Slew of Dylans," *Green Cine*, May 6, 2008, <https://www.greencine.com/central/toddhaynes> (accessed 13 August 13, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> Walter Kaufman, *Freud, Adler, and Jung*. Volume 3 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 178.

<sup>52</sup> Loren Glass, "Buying In, Selling Out: From Literary to Musical Celebrity in the United States," *The Hedgehog Review* (Spring 2005): 32.

<sup>53</sup> *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (New York: Columbia, 1964), 2, 8, as cited in Glass, 32.

<sup>54</sup> This cycle is broadly typical of celebrity consumption. For an example in another context, see a recent *Sports Illustrated* article on tennis star, Roger Federer. Here, though the author wishes to temper rash judgment of this athlete, but, ultimately, grants that the rituals of consumption follow an unstoppable, conventional pattern: "If there's a truism about storied athletes, it's that a tear-down process is inevitable..." Bruce Jenkins, "Federer's excuses, dismissive remarks at Wimby invite criticism" *Sports Illustrated Online* July 6, 2010 [http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2010/writers/bruce\\_jenkins/07/06/federer.wimbledon/index.html](http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2010/writers/bruce_jenkins/07/06/federer.wimbledon/index.html)

<sup>55</sup> Dennis Bingham astutely notes how the Dylan song chosen for the film's title (in addition to "suggesting the biopic subject as absence") announces the film's noncommercial values because it is such an unpopular song— available only on bootlegs up until *I'm Not There's* soundtrack release. In contrast to this choice, Bingham notes how frequently biopics (such as *Walk the Line*) use one of the star's top-hits to advertize the film. Bingham, 382-383.

<sup>56</sup> Greil Marcus noted a similar effect at work in "Like a Rolling Stone:" "There is that stick coming down hard on the drum and the foot hitting the kick drum at the same time, this particular rifle going off not in the third act, but as the curtain goes up . . . . Then for an expanding instant there is nothing. The first sound is so stark and surprising, every time you hear it, that the empty split-second that follows calls us the image of a house tumbling over a cliff; it calls up a void." Greil Marcus, *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 2006), 94-95.

<sup>57</sup> Biesecker, 224.

<sup>58</sup> James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 18.

<sup>59</sup> Dominique Hecq, "Enter Ghosts, Authors, and Translators," *TEXT* 13, no. 1 (April 2009) <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april09/hecq.htm>

<sup>60</sup> Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1996, 159. Žižek provides a concise explanation of these three orders in *How to Read Lacan* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 8-9; 79-80.

<sup>61</sup> Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 57.

<sup>62</sup> Heath contrasts *jouissance* with Roland Barthes' related concept of *plaisir* in *Image, Music, Text*, defined as "linked to cultural enjoyment and identity, to the cultural enjoyment of identity, to a homogenizing movement of the ego," in other words, the lighter, less threatening side of *jouissance*. Stephen Heath, Translator's Note to Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 9.

<sup>63</sup> Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 79.

<sup>64</sup> Copjec 46.

<sup>65</sup> Salecl, 108.

<sup>66</sup> Atkinson, 21.

<sup>67</sup> Copjec, 190.

<sup>68</sup> Copjec, 190.

<sup>69</sup> Copjec, 34.



<sup>70</sup> Atkinson, 27.

<sup>71</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *The Historical Film: History and Media in Memory*, ed. Marcia Landy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 269.

<sup>72</sup> Andre Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema?, Volume 1* (1967; repr., Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 9.

<sup>73</sup> Anna Everett effectively describes the sensory experience of the digital era as defined by the persistent presence of visual material. Media consumption, now, is defined by the "click fetish" and the "lure of sensory plenitude." Anna Everett, "Click This: From Analog Dreams to Digital Realities," *Cinema Journal* 43, vol. 3 (2004): 93-98.

<sup>74</sup> Caroline Merz, "An Examination of Biography in Film and Television," (PhD diss., University of East Anglia, 1981), as cited in Joannou, Mary and Steve McIntyre. "Lust for Lives: Report from a Conference on the Biopic," *Screen*, 24, no. 4-5 (1983): 146.

<sup>75</sup> Bingham, 10.

<sup>76</sup> Lacan, as quoted in Copjec, 37.

<sup>77</sup> Copjec, 37-38.

## Conclusion

<sup>1</sup> Ramin Setoodeh, "Are Biopics History?" *Newsweek* online 11 February 2010 <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/02/10/are-biopics-history.html> (accessed September 8, 2010); Ryan Gilbery, "Making Biopics: What's Truth Got to Do With It?" *The Guardian* online July 18, 2010 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/jul/18/making-biopics> (accessed September 8, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> Anderson and Lupo, "Hollywood Lives," 93

<sup>3</sup> Altman, 170

<sup>4</sup> Renata Salecl, *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* (London: Verso, 2000), 108.

<sup>5</sup> Merz, 146.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 227.

<sup>7</sup> Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 4

<sup>8</sup> Bingham, 380.

<sup>9</sup> For sources which illustrate the supposed antagonism of these modes, see David Bordwell, "Slavoj Žižek: Say Anything," David Bordwell's website on cinema, April 2005 <http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/zizek.php>, David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), and Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Christine Gledhill writes that, "like cartographers, early genre critics sought to define fictional territories and the borders which divided them." "Rethinking Genres," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. --- and Linda Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 221-222.

<sup>11</sup> Custen, 5-6.

<sup>12</sup> David Brackett, "Banjos, Biopics, and Compilation Scores: The Movies Go Country," *American Music* 19, no. 3 (2001): 265.

<sup>13</sup> Borys Kit, "'World Trade Center' writer joins N.W.A. film," *The Hollywood Reporter* online May 2, 2010 [http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content\\_display/film/news/e3i37b1b301206de33f69e8e1eecef6c8a0](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content_display/film/news/e3i37b1b301206de33f69e8e1eecef6c8a0) (accessed September 8, 2010)  
Simon Reynolds, "Exclusive: Fuqua confirms Tupac biopic as next film," *Digital Spy* May 28, 2010 <http://www.digitalspy.com/movies/news/a222434/fuqua-confirms-tupac-biopic-as-next-film.html> (accessed September 8, 2010)

<sup>14</sup> "Jon M. Chu to direct Justin Bieber 3D pic," *The Hollywood Reporter* online August 13, 2010 [http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content\\_display/news/e3i38fc3a9296f214d33a779c33ac1b40bc](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content_display/news/e3i38fc3a9296f214d33a779c33ac1b40bc) (accessed September 8, 2010) A recent study from a business research conference confirms the biopic's status as genre likely to return a profit. Wayne J. McMullen and Raj Varma, "Project Returns from Investment Decisions: Evidence from Biopics," Proceedings of the Annual London Business Research Conference, 2010, Finance Papers <http://www.wbiconpro.com/13-RajDup-USA.pdf> (accessed September 8, 2010)

<sup>15</sup> AFP, "Bollywood Gets Personal With a Bevy of Biopics," *Emirates 24/7* Online 30 July 2010 <http://www.emirates247.com/entertainment/films-music/bollywood-gets-personal-with-a-bevy-of-biopics-2010-07-30-1.272844> (accessed September 8, 2010); Wilson Morales, "Chiwetel Ejiofor Chosen to Play Fela in Big-Screen Biopic," *Black Voices* 6 May 2010 <http://www.bvonmovies.com/2010/05/06/chiwetel-ejiofor-to-play-fela-in-biopic/> (accessed September 14, 2010); Nick Holdsworth, "'Russian Bob Dylan' inspires biopic," *Variety* Online. 24 June 2010. <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118021003.html?categoryId=3599> (accessed September 8, 2010)

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Campbell, "Ozzy Osbourne Biopic Finally in the Works," *Cinematical Online* April 27, 2010 <http://www.cinematical.com/2010/04/27/ozzy-osbourne-biopic-finally-in-the-works/> (accessed September 15, 2010); "Boy George movie coming to BBC," *CBC News* February 6, 2010 <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/tv/story/2010/02/06/boygeorge-movie-bbc.html> (accessed September 15, 2010); "Reese Witherspoon to play Peggy Lee in new biopic," *NME* <http://www.nme.com/movies/news/reese-witherspoon-to-play-peggy-lee-in-new-biopic/182907> (accessed September 15, 2010); "Amy Adams as Janis Joplin," *Parade: 10 Powerful Portrayals of Female Singers* <http://www.parade.com/celebrity/slideshows/editors-pick/powerful-portrayals-of-female-singers.html?index=5> (accessed September 15, 2010); Steve Chagollan, "Music Biopics Struggle to Make it to the Screen," *Variety* <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118017182.html?categoryid=13&cs=1> (accessed September 15, 2010); Kara Warner, "Mary J. Blige to Star in Nina Simone Biopic," *MTV News* [http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1639185/20100513/blige\\_mary\\_j.jhtml](http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1639185/20100513/blige_mary_j.jhtml) (accessed September 15, 2010); Monika Bartyzel, "Bob Marley Gets New Life in London-Based Biopic," *Cinematical* <http://www.cinematical.com/2010/08/18/bob-marley-gets-new-life-in-london-based-biopic/> (accessed September 15, 2010)

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