

Musicals reborn as rock goes legit

By Casey McCabe
Entertainment editor

Rock and roll has gone legitimate. The screaming throngs of teeny boppers who flocked to see Elvis and the Beatles have grown up. The parents who, with the advent of rock, were always fearful about what was happening to the youth of today, have been replaced by a generation who is raising its children on the very same music

Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, The Last Waltz, FM, The Buddy Holly Story, American Hot Wax, Renaldo & Clara, I Wanna Hold Your Hand, and in the disco vein, Saturday Night Fever, and Thank God It's Friday.

Some, of course, are more authentic than others. However, these have had a poorer box office showing than the more glamorous productions of *Grease* and *Sgt. Pepper*.

rounds is *The Buddy Holly Story*. It is meeting with excellent critical reviews, and to some, a surprising, though mild box office success.

Buddy Holly was an unassuming looking rock star who emerged from Lubbock, Texas during the fifties and proceeded to have a great impact on the still evolving rock music world. His career was a short one, as he died in a 1959 plane crash, thus creating the Buddy Holly legend. Even today there are Buddy Holly cultists, and recent recording stars, most notably Linda Ronstadt, have found success in recording his material.

The film is carried by the sensitive portrayal of Holly by musician/actor Gary Busey. He, as well as the backup band, The Crickets, played and sang themselves, avoiding the uncomfortable look and sound of lip-synchs. The final scene may bother the staunch Holly fans, as it shows Buddy playing his last show with a full orchestra, seeming to have abandoned the Crickets, when in reality his final show was with the Crickets. Although it has left Lincoln now, it is recommended viewing if you have the chance or desire to see a film one of the truly unique and inspiring performers of early rock 'n roll.

After eight years, it seems that the sixties may soon be fair game for nostalgia. While the musicians in *The Last Waltz* are still going strong today, they are performers who made their first and biggest marks during the sixties, and that inescapable aura still seems to hang around them, especially when they're all together.

It is a film of The Bands lavish farewell performance at San Francisco's Winterland Auditorium which featured guest performances by Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, Neil Young, Van Morrison, Joni Mitchell, Muddy Waters, and Neil Diamond to name a few.

Even though they are some of the biggest names in the business, they have motion picture drawing appeal to a fairly select group, as the younger movie crowds have little to relate to in this event. While only enjoying a one week stay in Lincoln, it returns to the Stuart Theater as the KFMQ midnight movie tomorrow night.

Making *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, had to be quite a risk. For one, they took the most successful album by the most revered group in rock music to base their movie on, and for that reason alone, Robert Stigwood has offended many. *Sgt. Pepper*, released by the Beatles in 1967, is viewed by most as the powerful turning point in rock music, Peter Frampton and the Bee Gees, though products of the British sixties, are viewed by most as the new matinee pop idols, and they take the lead roles. This too, offends some.

But these initial prejudices could have been avoided. It was wisely decided not to make *Sgt. Pepper* a Beatles movie. It's just a movie with a plot loosely woven around 30, uh... about thirty of the Beatles best songs. Since another wise decision was made in not letting Frampton or the Bee Gees try to act, these songs comprise 90 percent of the movie.

The theme is your basic good against evil story, the good of the small imaginary town of Heartland, against the evil of Los Angeles and the sinful recording industry. The slogan of the bad guys, (who include Steve Martin, Alice Cooper, and Aerosmith) is "We Hate Joy, We Hate Love, We Love Money" which is driven into the heads of a new generation of young listeners. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* resists temptation and goes about restoring love to their debauched town.

There is much irony in Robert Stigwood making a movie that preaches love over money. The film apparently was made without any attempt at artistic redemption. It was apparently made to make a lot of money. Frampton and the Bee Gees have the top two selling L.P.'s of all time, George Burns, and Steve Martin are also hot properties, the Beatles music is legendary, the promotion is excessive, and the soundtrack will soon be flooding the top-40, to listeners that were too young to remember the Beatles.

As earlier mentioned, this is just the first wave of rock movies. The musicals seem to have been saved from almost certain death by the realization that rock 'n roll is now the legitimate and dominant music of this generation. There will be good rock films, there will be bad rock films, but they are all out, hoping to prove that rock 'n roll is here to stay.



Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures

Teenage Louise (Laraine Newman) coaches The Chesterfields in a rendition of one of her songs she hopes will gain the ear of D.J. Alan Freed in *American Hot Wax*.

that caused its parents fears.

There are many ironies in this, besides the fact that parents and children may soon be having interchangeable record collections. Chuck Berry, who despite the claims of many Elvis fans, best deserves the title "King of Rock 'n roll," had his biggest selling hit (*My Ding-a-Ling*) nearly 20 years after his definitive rock song, *Johnny B Goode* (a tune you might note, that was included in the "Sounds of Earth" package put aboard a NASA space probe, and due for release outside the solar system before the year 2000).

And even two years ago, Capital records made a strong push to re-release old Beatles material, because the new record buying audience wasn't old enough to remember the Beatles!

So what we have is an audience somewhere between the ages of 16 and 40 who have made rock the most popular music of all time. And as most people know, those are the people who have the greatest buying power today.

This has produced some interesting trends in marketing, and thus a boom in rock comic books, rock t-shirts, rock radio stations and the like. At least three Lincoln radio stations have abandoned the likes of Perry Como and Peggy Lee, for a more lucrative title as "adult contemporary" station, or in the layman's terms "pop rock."

But probably the most visible boom comes in the form of rock movies. Rock manager Irving Azoff described the new situation in *Rolling Stone*.

"Its straight dollars and cents... the fact that Warner Communications actually earned more money with their record division than their picture division. The numbers exploded in the record business. It was a natural thing to turn to."

There always were rock movies. From *Blackboard Jungle*, where audiences first heard Bill Haley and the Comets play "Rock Around the Clock," through the Elvis movies, and the rash of beach movies. But these were usually low budgeted films, aimed at a fairly select audience.

Now every major studio has a "rock" picture released, and at least another in the making. The first wave includes *Grease*,

American Hot Wax attempted to be the most authentic of all. It is based on a few days in the life of Alan Freed, the fifties D.J. who coined the term "rock 'n roll" and defended it until his untimely death in 1965. On hand for the making of *Hot Wax* were Freed's wife, son and daughter, who vouched for the films authenticity.

Although no gem of a film, it did manage to capture the excitement of early rock 'n roll. Not just rock mind you, but rock and roll with that basic blues beat that kept the kids dancing in the aisles, and the police, parents, and district attorney on Freed's tail with the intent of stopping any more outbreaks of this dreaded new sound.

"You just can't stand to see a bunch of kids having a good time," says Freed, chiding the stone-faced district attorney. "You can stop this show, but you can't stop rock 'n roll."

They didn't of course, stop rock 'n roll, but they did stop the show, which included performances by Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry, both still out proving that rock can survive after 40. And for that matter, they stopped Freed's career. After being indicted for payola and tax evasion, he died penniless.

American Hot Wax may not have settled well with some people, in that it wasn't the fifties of *Happy Days*, and *Grease*, but actually hard times with real people, and rock 'n roll was part of a rebellion.

Grease, on the other hand, made no attempt at heavy social overtones. Adapted from the highly successful Broadway play which first brought John Travolta into the public eye, the directors wisely chose to let *Grease* remain not just a fifties piece, but a lighthearted, very camp parody of the fifties, landing somewhere between *Bye Bye Birdie* and *West Side Story*.

The songs are vintage fifties pop, with maybe a bit more schmaltz thrown in. Frankie Avalon comes down from "that big 'ol malt shop in the sky" as a guardian angel to sing "Bearty School Dropout", and of course there is a token hot-rod number in "Greased Lightning". Though much of the music may be too fluffy for some, *Grease* is proving to be both a huge box office and soundtrack money maker.

Another fifties era movie making the