

RockingMusicInTheMovies1957TextTVS

By Tim Van Schmidt

Rocking Music in the Movies 1957

Jailhouse Rock

"Jailhouse Rock," starring Elvis Presley, is not just a star vehicle for the hottest thing around in 1957. "Jailhouse Rock" is a movie about music first and foremost, perhaps concocted for Presley, but easily standing on its own as a production. The movie is also much darker and grittier than any of the rock and roll movies that preceded it. Unlike "Rock Around the Clock," for example, "Jailhouse Rock" is not a whitewashed version of the music business.

First of all, the main focus of the story- a troubled young man named Vince, played by Presley- is not introduced particularly as a musician. He's just a hotheaded guy who gets into a lethal bar fight and is sent to prison for manslaughter as a result. In the penitentiary, his wizened cellmate teaches him some of the tricks to surviving the hardships of prison- and pulls out a guitar to sing a country blues tune, "One More Day," to soothe the nerves of other prisoners in the cell block. Impressed, Presley's character shows that he can sing too- strumming on the battered old acoustic guitar and sweetly delivering a verse and chorus of "Young and Beautiful." It's a nice moment, an opportunity to hear Presley's voice without any outside meddling from a band or singers. And so the foundation for the movie's action is laid.

While Vince proves in prison that he has a respectable singing voice, he is raw and untrained, as well as extremely naive. His cellmate tells him of his former success in the music business as a country singer and Vince focuses on a music career as a way to make money, not because he is dedicated to music as an art form. For him, it's all about the cash- and the girls, of course.

There's a lot of luck involved in Vince's development as a recording star. A television crew, it turns out, is producing a talent show from the prison, giving Vince his first opportunity to shine. He does too, receiving a sack full of fan mail- mail that the prison warden does not deliver to him until his day of release. The letters help convince him he has a chance.

When Vince shows up at a club owned by a former associate of his cellmate to get a job singing, he ends up sitting next to a woman working in the record business. They chat, he bulls on stage to perform when

the club owner turns him down and while he doesn't get the job, he gets the girl and his career, thanks to her, gets kick-started.

The scene in the nightclub indicates just how naive Vince is. After he takes the stage without being invited, he goes ahead and plows into his favorite ballad, "Young and Beautiful," only this time with a band. One loud guy in the club doesn't pay attention to the music and this inspires Vince to jump off of the stage and smash his guitar on the guy's table, stomping out of the club, fuming.

Vince's temper is his worst enemy throughout "Jailhouse Rock." It's what puts him into prison in the first place and it's what separates him from his associates as he gets famous. He's selfish and butt-headed despite the fact that his girlfriend and others help him to his success. His lack of clarity gets in the way time and time again, all the way through to the end of the movie.

Fortunately, "Jailhouse Rock" also is about the creative process and the early scenes of Vince's recording attempts are ultimately what makes this interesting as a legitimate rock and roll movie of the time. It turns out that Vince has never heard a recording of his own voice and his girlfriend suggests that doing a recording might be instructive in terms of improving his chances as a professional.

The first tune Vince records- one that gets stolen by another record company- is "Don't Leave Me Now" and it's performed twice. The first time, Vince performs on guitar while being backed by his band. It's an easy rolling version accented by the strum of the guitar. After listening, he decides he doesn't like it- that he "sounds like a million other singers." At the encouragement of his girl friend, who tells him to make the song "fit you," Vince records another take, but this time without the guitar. This allows him to concentrate on his vocals, something that adds power and energy to his performance. So much so, he has to stand up and push his stool away during the song.

Interestingly, the biggest production number of the movie- the title song- is the least interesting. That's because this is a set piece. It has to do with the dancing and movement more than the music. That's OK, because during the number, Presley gets to demonstrate the hip-swiveling skills that made him such a danger to the youth of 1957. Still, this is not about the song, it's about the visual elements. In fact the original "Jailhouse Rock" recording is augmented by horns and extra vocals, changing its nature from gritty rocker to big production showpiece.

That goes for "(You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care" as well- a tune performed during a backyard pool party. Presley gets to gyrate but the performance is ineffective because of its stilted set-up- out in a backyard during the day, an unlikely place and time to see a fiery rocker. The people sitting around the pool during the performance must think so too because they witness this moment without hardly moving a muscle. Added to this is the slick sweater and white-topped shoes Presley wears during the song- hardly the attire of a mixed-up rebel. It's pretty unconvincing.

The best music moment of the entire movie, however, is when Presley, his group, his girlfriend and lawyer record "Treat Me Nice" in the studio. Presley seems to genuinely get into it and for just a moment you imagine you are really seeing a recording session with Presley and band. That the girlfriend and lawyer, just sitting around in the studio, add some energetic hand clapping to the track gives a laid-back, friendly feel to the moment. This is not a superstar doing the recording, it's just a talented kid who finds a reasonable outlet for his roiling personality in music. That he begins the song by tapping on the microphone for a percussive effect also supports the unpretentious feel of the moment.

"Treat Me Nice" becomes the recording that gets Vince's foot in the door in the record industry- he and his girlfriend bypass the established record companies and set up their own. At first, "Treat Me Nice" gets played underneath a dog food commercial, but radio listeners complain so much that the record gets its due on the air and becomes a smash hit. Soon Vince is signing autographs for crowds of pretty girls.

I also felt the performance scene during the prison television show, Presley doing "I Want to Be Free," was a major highlight. Just as you might imagine the recording scene of "Treat Me Nice" was authentic, you can also imagine the performance of "I Want to Be Free" as being authentic. Sure, Presley and band are all dressed in prison garb, but they are placed on stage like you would place a live band- Presley up front at the mike, playing guitar, with the bass, drums and guitar behind to one side and the piano to the other side. It's just a simple, standard stage set-up and offers a glimpse of what Presley really did look like live with his band.

There's another music moment worth mentioning in "Jailhouse Rock," and that occurs when Vince's record industry girl friend takes him home to meet her parents. It turns out the parents are having a party and at one point, they put on a modern jazz record and the guests start discussing it. They compare the "atonality" of artists such as "Brubeck and Desmond" to "pure old Dixieland," and then ask Vince his opinion. Rather than being interested, Vince takes this as a slight and storms out of the party, again indicating at just how little he appreciates the efforts of those around him.

It's almost shocking how raw some of the action is in "Jailhouse Rock." The bar fight that lands Vince in prison is ferocious. He literally gets whipped as punishment for his part in a prison riot and his work is tough and grimy. Vince viciously slaps a record executive back into his chair when he confronts him for stealing his "style." The guitar-smashing scene adds to this as well as the fight scene between Vince and his former cellmate that sends the singer to the hospital. All of this comes on with frantic bursts of hostility that tend to set this movie apart from its more lightweight predecessors.

Directed by Richard Thorpe...1957...96 minutes...Elvis Presley (as Vince Everett)...Judy Tyler (as Peggy)...Mickey Shaughnessy (as Hunk)...Vaughn Taylor (as Shores, the lawyer)...Bill Black (on bass)...DJ Fontana (on drums)...Scotty Moore (on guitar)...Mike Stoller (on piano)

Jailhouse Rock songs

"One More Day"

(uncredited)

Written by Sid Tepper & Roy C. Bennett

Performed by Mickey Shaughnessy

"Young And Beautiful"

(uncredited)

Written by Abner Silver & Aaron Schröder

Performed by Elvis Presley

"I Want To Be Free"

(uncredited)

Written by Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller

Performed by Elvis Presley

"Don't Leave Me Now"

(uncredited)

Written by Aaron Schröder (as Aaron Schroeder) & Ben Weisman

Performed by Elvis Presley

"Treat Me Nice"

(uncredited)

Written by Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller

Performed by Elvis Presley

"Jailhouse Rock"

(uncredited)

Written by Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller

Performed by Elvis Presley

Choreographed by Elvis Presley

"(You're So Square) Baby I Don't Care"

(uncredited)

Written by Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller

Performed by Elvis Presley

Loving You

I watched the 1957 Elvis Presley movies out of order, viewing "Jailhouse Rock" first, then "Loving You." It probably doesn't make much difference, but I think that "Jailhouse Rock" may have had even more impact had I watched the lighter, cooler version of "the making of a rock and roll star" theme in "Loving

You" first. "Jailhouse Rock" is most certainly the stronger of the two. However, "Loving You," also about the music industry, carries weight of its own.

"Loving You" casts Presley as Deke Rivers, a delivery guy who gets an unexpected break at a political candidate event. At the urging of a friend, he gets pulled on stage to entertain the local crowd who are getting restless with the candidate's hollow speeches. Rivers is a little surly, but also humble, and a rocker, making the local girls twitter. The effect he has does not go unnoticed by a wily press agent and manager of the touring band accompanying the candidate. In fact, she dumps the candidate and convinces Rivers to join the band on tour, sensing a change of fortune for everybody.

Lizabeth Scott plays Glenda, the mover and shaker behind Rivers' career, with cool confidence. She is the acting anchor to "Loving You," making all the key connections for the plot action and being the center of attention in every scene she's in. But Wendell Corey also adds able and humorous support in the role of Tex Warner, the aging country star looking for a contemporary boost only a kid like Rivers can give.

Despite the ultimately artificial environments created to showcase Presley in action, "Loving You" features a nice collection of performance sequences, including "Got A Lot O' Livin' To Do," "(Let's Have A) Party," "Mean Woman Blues" and "Hot Dog." Also included is Presley's big 1957 hit "(Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear" and the romantic theme song "Loving You."

The two numbers that stand out the most are "Mean Woman Blues" and the big finale, "Got A Lot O' Livin' to Do." "Mean Woman Blues" is performed by Rivers in a juke joint- singing to a record playing on a jukebox- where he not only gets the crowd clapping their hands and yelping, but also slides and jerks across the floor. It's an exciting sequence.

"Got A Lot O' Livin' to Do" closes out the movie with a celebration of music and movement in a theater setting- another exciting scene of handclapping fun- but also appears early in the movie. It's the song Rivers ends up singing when first pushed onto the stage in the beginning. I liked the scenes of Presley performing with the band at community fairs and various outdoor functions towards the beginning. It's a fine fantasy- to be able to see a performer like Presley in some laid-back, back road event. It's all artificially staged, but gives a taste of it anyway.

My favorite musical scene in "Loving You," however, is Presley- in full Western gear- performing "Lonesome Cowboy." It all starts with a dramatic scene- Presley shot from a distance, standing alone in a spotlight. The relative quiet of the song's introduction is in contrast to the other more upbeat music in the movie. The song, despite the cowboy flavor, is a breath of fresh air in the production. Presley plays it straight with the tune and uses his voice to create a beautiful moment. The beautiful moment is ruined in the movie by a girl in the audience interrupting the song, confusing and embarrassing Rivers, foreshadowing the problems his popularity will create. His rendering of "Loving You" during a family picnic is also very sweet.

"Loving You" has one ferocious fight scene- when a local tough gets in Rivers' face one night- and Rivers gets hot when Tex makes an innocuous crack about his family, but for the most part, Presley plays Rivers as a little thickheaded, but ultimately a good and righteous person. This is in stark contrast to Presley's character, Vince, in "Jailhouse Rock," who is selfish and bullheaded throughout.

There is another stark contrast between "Loving You" and "Jailhouse Rock," and it's an obvious one. That is, "Loving You" is shot in full color and "Jailhouse Rock" is in black and white. It's interesting that the color film comes first. Why would the movie studio go back to black and white, once the young star has made the jump to color? The unique contrast that black and white offers seems to play along well with the grittiness of "Jailhouse Rock," but I'm wondering if the aesthetic of the medium had anything to do with it.

The two movies- "Loving You" and "Jailhouse Rock"- are very good book ends in the emerging story of rock and roll. On one end is the success of a rather innocent, naive but talented singer and on the other end is the equal success of a rebellious, hot-headed yet ambitious performer. Both achieve more than they could have on their own, speaking to the importance of other people recognizing and nurturing raw talent. But the gold nugget here is the talent itself. This offers a new dream to the exploding teenage population of the 1950s- to overcome big odds to become a rock and roll star. These movies offer a kind of come-on to the audience. Like, it happened to Presley's characters so it can happen to you.

It seems important to point out that in these rock and roll movies, it is an individual who succeeds. In "Rock Around the Clock," for instance, it is Bill Haley and the Comets, a group, who are catapulted to fame. But the Presley movies concentrate on the fortunes of one guy. This clears the way for fantasies of stardom that can be achieved without the benefit of a bigger group. The message seems to be "YOU can succeed, too" not "You and your band can succeed." Personalizing the rock and roll dream is the result here.

I wanted to mention a few stray details from "Loving You." The first is that one of the key elements to Rivers' character is his car- a souped up hot rod he calls "the ride" that makes several appearances in the movie. It's a nod to the car culture that was raging at the same time as rock and roll.

Another detail is the irony in a statement Tex makes to Rivers. Tex ends up being a kind of mentor to Rivers and in a talk about the entertainment business he tells the younger man how quickly everything can come- the record deals, the big concert tours and "...maybe even movies." Here, maybe unconsciously, the movie reveals the pecking order in entertainment. Music is great, it seems, but movies are the ultimate. That attitude adequately mirrored what happened in Presley's career in real life.

I'll also mention the reoccurring theme of the broken guitar string. Rivers has raw talent, but is not quite a pro yet and that gets underscored by his breaking a guitar string during each of his early performances in the movie. Eventually, Rivers is given his own guitar and is from then on responsible for changing his own strings. This is a tiny, humorous but telling detail of life as a musician.

Directed by Hal Kanter...1957...101 min...featuring Elvis Presley (Deke Rivers,) Lizabeth Scott, Wendell Corey, Dolores Hart, Paul Smith.

Loving You Songs

"Got A Lot O' Livin' To Do"

Written by Aaron Schröder (as Aaron Schroeder) & Ben Weisman

Performed by Elvis Presley

"(Let's Have A) Party"

Written by Jessie Mae Robinson

Performed by Elvis Presley

"(Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear"

Written by Kal Mann & Bernie Lowe

Performed by Elvis Presley

"Hot Dog"

Written by Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller

Performed by Elvis Presley

"Lonesome Cowboy"

Written by Sid Tepper & Roy C. Bennett

Performed by Elvis Presley

"Mean Woman Blues"

Written by Claude Demetri

Performed by Elvis Presley

"Loving You"

Written by Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller

Performed by Elvis Presley

Mister Rock and Roll

"Mister Rock and Roll" is a mixed bag at best. The movie is currently out of print, but I was able to dig up a copy via the rock and roll memorabilia underground- and I'm a little on the fence as to its value. Ultimately it's a pretty poor production, however, there are some highlights to make it worth wading through. Those highlights include getting a primetime look at Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Also, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. What really rocks, however, is a surprise- Lionel Hampton and his orchestra. That says something about the kind of "rock and roll" being presented here.

The lowlights are also plentiful in "Mister Rock and Roll." For some reason, some of the movie is like a performance film- with acts on the concert stage or sound stage- but some of it is like a musical, actors breaking out into song during the course of the action. The roughest part of that in "Mister Rock and Roll" is the duet between Teddy Randazzo and Rocky Graziano. That's right- Rocky Graziano, the great fighter- is in the mix here for some kind of comic relief. It just wastes time that could have been used for another song by Little Richard or Chuck Berry.

There are similar problems with a reoccurring bit with a pair of songwriters continually trying to catch Randazzo's eye with a new, screw ball tune. While it illustrates something about the music business- the hungry songwriter continually hitting on the star- it's just goofy; wasting time.

Perhaps because "Mister Rock and Roll" is trying to vindicate a youth movement- rock and roll- that is battling a bad public image, the diversity of the music waters down any kind of sense of what "rock and roll" is. That means including performances by artists such as country crooner Ferlin Husky and female popster Shaye Cogan.

Husky, in particular, turns in limp performances at best, while awkwardly mugging for the camera. However, it's interesting that Husky is shot performing one song with a cigarette in hand, flicking ashes onto the floor throughout. Cogan turns in a stiff performance of "Get Acquainted Waltz," complete with corny arrangement and lyrics about being "tongue-tied." However, she fares a little better with "Pathway to Sin," a more upbeat but still graceless performance.

Some of the more talented artists in "Mister Rock and Roll" don't particularly fare much better. It seems to me that La Vern Baker is a talented vocalist, but her skills seem wasted here on frivolous songs, particularly the stupid "Humpty Dumpty Heart," a tune where Baker sings to a catatonic boyfriend. Baker has it better in her second tune, "Love Me Right in the Morning," which is straight R & B- without the stupid boyfriend.

The spots by vocalists Brook Benton and Clyde McPhatter are both compromised by unimaginative filming, working close-ups that underscore the ineffectiveness of lip-synching. The recording of McPhatter's voice sounds unnaturally strident coming out of the cool customer photographed on stage. He performs twice, including "You'll Be There." Benton, who performs "If Only I Had Known," must have

gone to the same performing school as Husky, adding awkward, dramatic hand and arm motions to the production.

The height of embarrassment in "Mister Rock and Roll" has to be the spot by the Moonglows, featured awkwardly wearing Mexican sombreros for the tune "Barcelona Rock." Let's just forget that Mexico and Barcelona are on different continents. The hats turn a fairly upbeat tune- that prominently features electric guitar- into a novelty song. The guys in the group smile and get it done- after all, illustrative choreography was not foreign to vocal groups- but it's just goofy.

Who really scores the top star treatment in "Mister Rock and Roll" is Randazzo, who is also a key player in the plot. Randazzo's music is dynamic thanks to upbeat arrangements, plenty of instrumental and vocal support, and some physical histrionics from the performer. It's show music alright, but is it rock and roll?

Randazzo gets to kick "Mister Rock and Roll" off with the bluesy show tune "Kiddio." He also gets the full band production for "Next Stop Paradise." During one of those movie musical moments, Randazzo does sit down to sing a solo ballad at the piano that perhaps best showcases his vocal talent. But he's back to a big, splashy show tune again for the closing number- "I Stop Anything I'm Doing"- a tune which inspires Randazzo to take off his coat, pull off his tie and get crazy while everybody around him, including Alan Freed and Lionel Hampton, are partying. None of it is particularly convincing- the music sounds contrived and Randazzo looks like he is mostly in pain as he winces his way through each piece.

Fortunately, there are a few good scenes too- starting at the top with Little Richard performing "Lucille." Richard is a riveting figure no matter how bad the production is, and here there are some close-ups. Then add in Chuck Berry, pantomiming to "Oh, Baby Doll." Lean and sassy, Berry makes a conscious effort to make his spot interesting by purposefully moving to the music. Playing guitar and singing are not enough for him and his fancy footwork and constant motion add plenty to a stiff situation at best.

Also interesting are the spots featuring Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. Dressed in dark suits, the group is presented rather formally and this works against them at first. But Lymon's characteristic beaming face- his broad smile and exaggerated expressions- as well as his strong, effective voice manage to overcome this problem. Although it's odd to see a 14-year-old making such faces about love and romance- he doesn't seem old enough to be so wise- Lymon's comfort with the spotlight goes a long way toward legitimizing the sentiments. The Teenagers offer plenty of vocal and visual support, the

entire group proving that it could work well as a complete unit. They appear twice- in sound stage settings- performing "Love Put Me Out of My Head" and "Fortunate Fellow."

But the best music scenes- and most curious- in "Mister Rock and Roll" are the rocking dance tunes played by Lionel Hampton and his orchestra. These include "Bravo," which features a solo by a female sax player, plus the infectious "Hey Popa Rock" and "Star Rocket," which features a lengthy vibes solo by Hampton.

As a big band leader and vibes player, Hampton is not the first artist you think of when the term "rock and roll" is mentioned. However, Freed introduces Hampton as an artist popular with "two generations" and what happens is a swinging dance party. The orchestra packs a definite punch, Hampton is a gregarious front man and the crowd does not seem to care who the artist is as long as they keep a snappy dance tempo in gear. Throughout these scenes in "Mister Rock and Roll," featured dancers take turns soloing on the dance floor in a raucous good time.

The most interesting part of "Mister Rock and Roll," however, above and beyond the handful of good performances, is the part Alan Freed plays in the whole thing. Of course, really, it's all about Freed, the Mister Rock and Roll the title refers to. In the movie, like in real life, Freed has become a major focal point for the rock and roll movement- he spins the records the teenagers want to hear, all the while hammering on the term "rock and roll," which he applies to everything he plays. Freed calls rock and roll "the greatest pop musical era of all time" and also becomes the focus for criticism of rock and roll. A major newspaper columnist calls him out as a fake and a danger to youth.

Randazzo makes it clear that from the artist's standpoint, Freed has been nothing but supportive. An exchange between Randazzo and Freed in "Mister Rock and Roll," then, becomes prophetic. Randazzo expresses his regrets for the trouble Freed is experiencing and Freed comes back with "Don't you worry. I can take care of myself. You just wait and see." This becomes darkly prophetic because Freed would become a central figure in the Senate payola investigation that opened up in 1959- and he wasn't alright after that.

On film, however, Freed prevails. In a classic public relations move in "Mister Rock and Roll," he finds an answer to the misconceptions of rock and roll by challenging his youthful listeners to prove their worth by encouraging them to donate to a heart fund. Predictably, the effort is a raving success and once again, Freed has saved rock and roll.

That the Lionel Hampton scenes are the most exciting music moments, along with Freed's constant reference to "rock and roll" as he spins diverse platters on his radio show, helps support the idea that maybe rock and roll was not particularly about the music- though important- but about the dancers and listeners. This turns "rock and roll" into a kind of universal term for the music of that particular generation, not a term referring to a particular genre of music. While this blunts rock and roll as a definitive cultural movement, it also helps break down prejudices drawn from too narrow a view of what rock and roll really is.

The haphazardness of "Mister Rock and Roll" as a production ultimately dooms the movie to its fate as an out-of-print curiosity. Still, the attempts to make a logical case supporting rock and roll as a healthy outlet for teenage energy are laudable. The very beginning of the movie even includes a little history lesson about the development of popular music- Blues, Dixieland and Jazz have to make room for Mister Rock and Roll- so despite the ragged quality, there are solid points being made here.

Directed by Charles S. Dubin...1957...86 min...featuring Alan Freed, Teddy Randazzo, Lois O'Brien, Rocky Graziano, Lionel Hampton, Ferlin Husky, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, Little Richard, Brook Benton, Chuck Berry, Clyde McPhatter, La Vern Baker, Shaye Cogan, Screamin' Jay Hawkins.

Jamboree

"Jamboree" is not a rock and roll movie. There's some "rock and roll" in it, but the main body of the movie is about the music business as it existed in the 1950s all around the relatively new and relatively small music movement. This movie is about pop music in general- from syrupy ballads and novelty numbers to country, jazz, blues and unabashed show tunes.

If you were to connect "Jamboree" to rock and roll, other than through a mere handful of appearances by artists who might be said to be playing the new music, it would be through the factor of youth. The teenager explosion of the 1950s was reflected in many kinds of music other than rock and roll, including straight, clean cut records where the kids sang like birds.

That's the set up for "Jamboree"- two talented young singers team up as a romantic duo on record and in real life. Their names are Pete and Honey and they are sweet, likeable young folk who are just starry

eyed about their good fortune. They've got a hit record, they're being interviewed on radio from coast to coast and their fan clubs are growing.

But the main players here aren't the kids, they're the adults pulling the strings behind the scenes. In this case, Pete and Honey's managers. As it turns out, Honey's manager Lew and Pete's manager Grace were married to each other at one time and there's really nothing young about them. They're hard-bitten and cynical and wary of each other's wily ways. They aren't particularly evil people- although Grace does mess with Pete and Honey's personal relationship- but they're a far cry away from the world of rock and roll. That's all clear when Grace declares that Pete and Honey rhyme with "bank and money."

For all of the supposed hoopla, the Pete and Honey record, "Who Are We to Say," is a slow, purposeful ballad. Honestly, it's pretty dull and that makes the whole frenzy surrounding the two all the more unbelievable. However, the Pete and Honey story does attempt to give a feel for the recording process, since several of the scenes take place at a studio. That also is kind of unbelievable, though- the idea that a decent recording can be made with the vocalists singing toward a single mike and the rest of the room is filled with an orchestra. It's also funny that for all of the nervousness around recording, in the end, all the engineer does is turn on a little reel to reel tape recorder.

Thankfully, the wooden storyline of "Jamboree" is only about half of the movie. The other half is full of performance clips of a wide variety of artists. Only a handful of them- certainly Carl Perkins, but also Charlie Gracie, Jimmy Bowen and the hot Jerry Lee Lewis- could be considered rock and rollers. But they are all part of just one big variety show. That, however, makes "Jamboree" a very interesting time capsule of the pop music of 1957.

To support that statement, there is a very unique element to "Jamboree" that beats all the other rock and roll movies. That is, throughout the course of the story, more than a dozen famous disc jockeys from around the United States, England and Europe are featured introducing the musical acts. They don't say much, it's true, but it's a very interesting look at what radio professionals of the time looked like- mostly older guys, all in dapper suits. My favorite of the disc jockey scenes, however, is that of Jocko Henderson, the DJ from "outer space." Henderson appears in a wild space suit concoction and even does a little poetic rapping before introducing Lewis Lymon and the Teenchords.

But further, the commentator for a telethon Pete and Honey participate in is Philadelphia DJ and television host Dick Clark. He's a very young man in "Jamboree" but has already mastered that suave sense of cool that would serve him so well on American Bandstand, which went national in 1957.

Television seems to be written all over "Jamboree" to me. Most of the musical performances occur on what looks like a television sound stage. There's a consistent look to the background sets- trying to look jazzy with as few materials as possible and spare lighting- and several of the scenes feature groupings of dancers who try to illustrate the songs. Meanwhile, most of the musicians are turned loose to walk around the set with their instruments unplugged, miming to the records. It all smacks of a production line approach that television producers would approve.

With all of that said, however, I'm thankful "Jamboree" features so much music, no matter how awkward the situation. Sure, some of it makes me wince, but some of it is pretty exciting, transcending the general production values.

On the weak side in "Jamboree," first of all, are several attempts to incorporate ethnic elements into the music- culturally based novelty records- perhaps to give the sound stage scenes some variety. Vocalist Jodie Sands gets wrapped up in a tight Oriental dress to sing "Sayonara." Ron Coby takes on the dramatic role of the bull fighter in "Toreador." The most successful of the ethnic spots is Buddy Knox performing "Hula Love." While the set-up is dumb- Knox and band performing uncomfortably in suits and leis- Knox still manages to put a little energy into it, trying out a few dance steps as well as putting a little echo of his hit "Party Doll" in the fade-out ending.

As stated, the Pete and Honey stuff is pretty sedate. That's Connie Francis' voice coming out Freda Holloway, who plays Honey. Francis' voice is strong, despite the general flaccidness of the music, and the scene where Honey records a solo song, "Siempre," is the best showcase moment for her contribution. However, Holloway is not a very good lip syncher and it makes it all the more obvious how artificial it all is.

Other questionable spots include the introductory song, titled "Record Hop," performed by members of a revue called "Cool Cats." It features insultingly dumb song lyrics that rhyme "soda pop" with "record hop" and a whole troupe of dancers who turn rock and roll dancing into just another fake, unbelievable situation. Slim Whitman's performance of "Unchain My Heart" is also very awkward- Whitman has a guitar strapped on, but he doesn't seem to know what to do with it while strolling around the set alone. The Four Coins' slick vocal performance of "A Broken Promise" isn't so bad- it's performed with reasonable vigor- it's just not my cup of musical tea. The Four Coins make me think of barbershop quartet music- it's jazzier, yeah, but also kind of goofy. These are clean cut boys, down to the matching handkerchiefs in the Coins' pockets.

"Jamboree," however, also features some pretty good stuff. A scene that surprised me was the one of a very young Frankie Avalon recording the tune "Teacher's Pet." It's a pop ditty with a bouncy beat and despite his obvious youth, Avalon displays a mature sense of style and confidence that overcomes the over-twangy background vocals, which is a distracting element.

I was also surprised by the Count Basie tunes. The great bandleader and his orchestra are a bunch of old pros and there's no awkwardness about them as they perform two tunes. The first is an instrumental titled "Jamboree," which starts out low, but builds plenty of swinging steam as it proceeds. It's interesting to note that the dance floor is filled with people in suits and evening gowns. Again, this is a far cry away from the world of rock and roll. The second song Basie and group plow through is a big blues tune, which features vocalist Joe Williams, introduced as "the world's greatest blues shouter." It's a big, dynamic number and Williams turns in one of the best pseudo-performances in the movie.

I also enjoyed the opportunity "Jamboree" affords to check out some artists I had not heard of before. That includes Charlie Gracie, performing "Cool Baby." In the scene, which also includes some dumb dancers in the background, Gracie is wearing a big, hollow-body guitar that is almost as big as the performer. But Gracie's breathy vocals and an infectious beat make the performance cool indeed. That also goes for Jimmy Bowen, who performs "Cross Over." It's another pop ditty that Bowen manages to enhance with confident delivery. It's also interesting to note that, of all the performers in "Jamboree," Bowen seems to be the most comfortable with the camera. During his spot, he does some obvious mugging and moves around the set like he knows what he's doing.

It is also fascinating to check out the performance by Lewis Lymon and the Teenchords, performing the song "Your Last Chance." Lymon was the younger brother of Frankie Lymon and you can hear a close resemblance in his voice. Lewis, however, is much younger than Frankie- perhaps the record industry was trying to form a new star early. Also, like Frankie and the Teenagers, Lewis and the Teenchords remain purposefully busy throughout the song, including a nice little choreographed dance section during the song's bridge. The scene also includes some interesting lighting effects, casting the group's shadows on the wall behind as they perform. "Your Last Chance" is not as musical as Frankie and the Teenagers' records, but the infectious energy is similar.

Finally, though, the best music in "Jamboree" comes from some familiar characters- Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Fats Domino.

Perkins and band perform "Glad All Over," an upbeat country-flavored tune. This was my very first look at Perkins as a performer and while the situation is stiff- this particular scene looks like it was filmed at a different time than a lot of the music spots- his music still cooks. Perkins does a pretty good job of lip synching the tune and that's saying something because the piece has some quick moving nonsense lyrics that make it a challenge. Obviously Perkins knew his own song very well. There's a nice close-up of Perkins' guitar and he even gets a little rock and roll hopping in during the instrumental break. The music sounds fresh and exciting- an authentic invention of the musician- compared to a lot of the commercial drivel in "Jamboree." It's interesting to note that Perkins and band are dressed in casual street clothes, not suits and ties, distancing themselves from a more groomed show business appearance.

Fats Domino is the last star on the stage before "Jamboree" wraps up with a Pete and Honey tune. Domino and band make the best of the situation, and actually look like they're having fun. I like Domino's image- this big guy in a suit, big smile, slick hair and a warm, pliable voice- and here he's performing "Wait and See." He's smooth and confident and the band is right there along with him.

The best of all in "Jamboree," however, is Jerry Lee Lewis, who performs his hot 1957 hit "Great Balls of Fire." Like Perkins, Lewis knows his song real well and does a good job lip synching. But more, he does a pretty good job at "finger synching" his piano part. On "Great Balls of Fire," Lewis does a lot on the keyboards- not just chords supporting the song. He's plenty active in the recording and manages to make it look like he's really playing it in the movie. He misses a few strokes up and down the keys, but pretty much nails it.

There's a production problem during the Lewis scene in "Jamboree" that also crops up in others. That is, at random times during Lewis' performance, the lighting changes abruptly. It goes from well-lit to dark and shadowed, I suppose to give the scene some visual variety. What it really does, however, is distract mightily with what's going on- Lewis passionately delivering one of the top hits of the year. The producer who thought that was a good idea needed a new job.

Fortunately, Lewis prevails in "Jamboree" anyway. He works the camera a little, his hair comes unglued and he comes off as quite a character. But what's clear is that Lewis OWNS his song and his piano. For stirring up excitement, if you can't have Elvis Presley or Little Richard in your movie, Jerry Lee Lewis is the next best bet.

Directed by Roy Lockwood...1957...1 hr. 26 min...featuring Kay Medford (as Grace,) Bob Pastine (as Lew,) Paul Carr (as Pete,) Freda Holloway (as Honey,) Dick Clark, Carl Perkins, Frankie Avalon, Charlie Gracie,

Jodie Sands, Jerry Lee Lewis, Lewis Lymon and the Teenchords, Ron Coby, Slim Whitman, Four Coins, Count Basie, Joe Williams, Buddy Knox, Jimmy Bowen, Fats Domino...Otis Blackwell serves as musical director.