

RockingMusicInTheMovies1958TextTVS

By Tim Van Schmidt

Rocking Music in the Movies

High School Confidential

"High School Confidential" is not a rock and roll movie- it's a movie with just a smidgen of rock and roll in it. But that smidgen is lively- Jerry Lee Lewis playing his "High School Confidential" hit song on the back of a flat bed truck while being driven by a high school during the opening credits. There's a banner on the truck, calling it the Jerry Lee Lewis "music truck," and Lewis and band make the most out of their brief appearance by throwing themselves into the lip synched performance- without throwing themselves off of the truck.

Lewis looks like he's having a pretty good time on the back of the truck in "High School Confidential." He gets up off his piano bench and attacks the keyboard with abandon, purposefully flipping his hair back. He's smiling too as the truck gets surrounded by "high schoolers" who break out into some energetic rock and roll dancing there on the pavement. It's a rousing beginning to a movie that slows down plenty when the plot- about drug dealing in the schools and hot rod racing on the streets- begins to unfold.

One other scene from "High School Confidential" is also worth mentioning. The movie is full of teenage hipster slang- almost overburdened with it. At one point, a band backs a young female poet- played by Phillipa Fallon- who super-seriously spews some hipster lines and cues the group with a snap of her fingers when she wants them to join in. She's got a tight sweater on, which underscores her pointy bullet bra look. Fallon's character is cool, collected and just a little arrogant. It's just an amusing look at beatnik poetry that stands out from the skullduggery of the rest of the production.

Directed by Jack Arnold...1958...85 min...featuring John Drew Barrymore, Mamie Van Doren, Jerry Lee Lewis, Jackie Coogan, Michael Landon.

King Creole

The buzz among Elvis Presley fans (at least the ones on IMDb.com) is that 1958's "King Creole" is the best of Presley's movies- that he showed his true colors as a talented actor. That, perhaps, could be debated. I personally think "Jailhouse Rock" is a better production- more terse, more raw. Everything about "King Creole" screams "better"- the director, the film noir-ish black and white photography, the New Orleans setting and especially the supporting cast. However, the weakest element of the movie is the star, whose halting, aw-shucks delivery style seems wooden and forced. Presley just seems inexperienced at creating a believable character when next to skilled actors such as "King Creole" co-stars Walter Matthau and Vic Morrow.

However, of the three Presley movies covered in this project so far- including "Loving You" and "Jailhouse Rock"- "King Creole" is the best showcase for Presley's music and when he takes the stage in various scenes, he dominates completely. The generous number of music scenes in "King Creole" fit in nicely with both the plot and the atmosphere of the movie, too. New Orleans is one of the great music centers of America, so a story about a night club singer which spotlights various performances is perfectly natural.

There are several upbeat night club performance highlights in "King Creole" and many of these feature Presley's basic rock and roll mixed with Dixieland jazz influences- notably the use of brass instruments.

The first of these performances is when Presley's character, Danny Fisher, is forced into an impromptu audition for a local mobster. Introduced as "Caruso, the Bus Boy," he gets on stage, joins the raucous band who just backed up a stripper and belts out a dramatic, bluesy tune titled "Trouble." The song starts slow, but revs up plenty as it goes along, Presley's hair going askew and the horns blasting. But there's more to it than just the performance because as Fisher emphasizes how "evil" he is in the song, it becomes like a theme song for him- and a warning to the mobster who got in his face.

The song "Dixieland Rock," performed by Fisher after being hired as a featured singer in another Bourbon Street night club, gets a jump start with a dramatic handclapping introduction. Presley lets loose physically during this scene, eventually jumping down into the audience to stir up some wild, handclapping support from the patrons.

For the song "New Orleans," a rocking ode to the excitement of the city, the lighting is affected so that Presley and his backing vocalists, played by the Jordanaires, all cast huge shadows on the wall behind them. The song is another up-tempo work out with some cool word play about losing the blues in "Louis-oozi-oozi-ana." The title song, "King Creole," also rocks with Presley performing with a big

acoustic guitar around his neck, "playing" the lead guitar part and generally exciting the audience that is, at least in the front rows, mostly made up of attractive women. Smoke curls up in the air as Fisher does his thing, yelping about the "hip shaking King Creole" who plays his guitar "like a Tommy gun."

Personally, I like the lower key performances in "King Creole" better than the louder stuff for the simple reason that when slowed down, the tunes do a much better job at revealing just what a gorgeous voice Presley had. That includes "Young Dreams," which Presley performs while sitting down, which looks hard for a star who likes to shake a leg. "Don't Ask Me Why" is a dramatic rock and roll ballad that particularly showcases Presley's deep tenor vocals. The movie winds up with another one of those slow ballads- "As Long As I Have You"- while bugs fly around his head and the smoke swirls.

The best of the lower key pieces, however, is "Lover Doll," an acoustic ditty that Fisher plays in a crowded five and dime store while some of his associates steal the place blind. The softer arrangement- with only some acoustic guitar strumming and understated accompaniment- once again allows Presley to showcase his vocal control. There is an effective time signature change too as he strolls from attractive girl to attractive girl, some holding teddy bears, others hanging out by the toy dolls.

Overall, though, my favorite music piece in "King Creole" is in the opening sequence of the movie. The song is titled "Crawfish" and it's a duet between Fisher and a street vendor. The woman's voice is credited to Kitty White and the tune has a subdued, yet deep beat, kept on track by bass, drums and prominent high hat cymbals. It's cool and bluesy- and the most unique song in the movie.

In "King Creole," then, Presley scores mightily with his music and not so much with his acting. Fortunately, he's supported by an exceptional cast. Walter Matthau is completely convincing as the hard-nosed mobster. Vic Morrow is an appropriately creepy mobster henchman and Carolyn Jones shines as the mixed up mobster moll that catches Rivers' eye. Added to this is a good message- ambitious, naive singers are easy targets for those with selfish designs.

Directed by Michael Curtiz...1958...116 min...featuring Elvis Presley, Walter Matthau, Vic Morrow, Carolyn Jones, Dolores Hart, Dean Jagger, Paul Stewart, Jan Shepard.

King Creole Songs

Crawfish"

Written by Fred Wise & Ben Weisman

Performed by Elvis Presley and Kitty White

"Steadfast, Loyal And True"

Written by Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller

Performed by Elvis Presley

"Lover Doll"

Written by Sid Wayne & Abner Silver

Performed by Elvis Presley

"Trouble"

Written by Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller

Performed by Elvis Presley

"Dixieland Rock"

Written by Aaron Schröder & Rachel Frank

Performed by Elvis Presley

"Young Dreams"

Written by Aaron Schröder & Martin Kalmanoff

Performed by Elvis Presley

"New Orleans"

Written by Sid Tepper & Roy C. Bennett

Performed by Elvis Presley

"Hard Headed Woman"

Written by Claude Demetri

Performed by Elvis Presley

"King Creole"

Written by Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller

Performed by Elvis Presley

"Don't Ask Me Why"

Written by Fred Wise & Ben Weisman

Performed by Elvis Presley

"As Long As I Have You"

Written by Fred Wise & Ben Weisman

Performed by Elvis Presley

The Big Beat

Directed by Will Cowan...1958...81 min...featuring Gogi Grant, Rose Marie, Howard Miller, the Diamonds, Fats Domino, Harry James, the Lancers, Mills Brothers, George Shearing, Cal Tjader...music by Henry Mancini.

Let's Rock (Keep It Cool)

Directed by Harry Foster...1958...79 min...featuring Paul Anka, Danny and the Juniors, Roy Hamilton, Wink Martindale, Della Reese, the Royal Teens, Tyrones.