

RockingMusicInTheMovies1959TextTVS

By Tim Van Schmidt

Rocking Music in the Movies

Go Johnny Go!

"Go Johnny Go!" is a poorly propped-up music movie that nonetheless manages to showcase a lot of 1950s talent. By 1959, it seems like a tired pursuit making a rock and roll movie, at least with the same old Alan Freed at the center of it all- even he doesn't seem to be all that thrilled by it. Fortunately, Freed has a sidekick in this one- Chuck Berry.

Berry not only strings along as an upbeat character in the movie- much more lively than Freed himself, who also produced the movie- but he also supplies a couple of tunes. He's sly, he's hip- and a promoter of up and coming musicians. He's the one in "Go Johnny Go!" who is always trying to get Freed's ear about this young artist or that- from the central character to the musical sketch group the Cadillacs to the young Ritchie Valens.

The featured character in "Go Johnny Go!", however, is played by Jimmy Clanton, who performs numerous times throughout the production- after all, the story is about his character, Johnny, and his struggle to get noticed in the music biz. Clanton's Johnny is a tough orphan with a big chip on his shoulder and a drive to succeed through music. When Freed reluctantly announces a talent search for a new boy singer to be named "Johnny Melody," Johnny the orphan sees his chance.

In "Go Johnny Go!" Clanton serves up a mixed bag of music, from glitzy show tune stuff to tender, reflective ballads. Honestly, the ballads sound more sincere and are more effective. When Clanton roughs up his voice for tunes like "It Takes a Long Time" or the movie finale "Ship on a Stormy Sea," it sounds forced and unnatural. That could be because Clanton's image is so strikingly straight and clean. His idea of passionate performing is to unbutton his suit coat and take off his tie during the song. He's just not a convincing rocker, despite the full band arrangements backing him up.

It is the more intimate, ballady songs like his "Johnny Melody" hit "My Love is Strong," the hymn he sings in a church choir or the sweet duet he sings with his female counterpart in the movie, Sandy Stewart, "Once Again," that succeed in showcasing Clanton's vocal talent. He's not so much a rocker as a

crooner and he's got a pretty nice voice for it, making male myth heavy songs like "Angel Face" palatable.

Stewart plays Johnny's love interest in "Go Johnny Go!", who is also an orphan and who also has musical talent. It's a touching part of the plot, really, that two orphans come together over music.

Stewart's showcase moment is during a demo recording session where she records "Playmates" with a lively band and strong male vocal back-up. It's an upbeat, fun piece that gains more from Stewart's handling of the song- with strength and verve- than from its silly lyrics. It's a highlight of the movie. Her other tune, "Heavenly Father," is a prayerful, solemn plea to keep her boyfriend safe, heavy on the female myths and acting as filler for the plot.

The thin plot and contrived showcase moments for the actors of "Go Johnny Go!" aside, there are notable appearances by some prominent artists throughout the movie- and it's great to see them- but there is very little attempt to hide the fakey lip synching going on. Still, the quick succession of acts helps the movie maintain a quick pace and many of the performers battle the stiffness of the lip synching by putting a little extra effort into moving for the camera.

The liveliest moment in "Go Johnny Go!" comes when the Flamingos perform "Jump Children." These guys are all over the place, jiggling, jumping, doing the splits and basically going nuts with various dancing antics. All the while, the guys are shouting "rock, rock, rock" in the background- what a shot of energy! It's hard to believe this is the same group who produced the super smooth 1959 hit "I've Only Got Eyes for You."

Both Jackie Wilson and Harvey, during solo spots, prove to be pretty adept at keeping things moving as well. Wilson, who Berry claims as a "relative," does a lot of fancy footwork- working on a kind of foot glide across the stage- whereas Harvey swings his arms and uses his hands to good effect. Harvey is a smooth operator with a pedestrian song, "Don't Be Afraid to Love Me," while Wilson stands out because of that unique falsetto voice, performing "You Better Know It."

Representing the "guy and guitar" rock and roll image, Eddie Cochran performs perky rocker "Teenage Heaven" and uses that big electric guitar for a dance partner during the song's instrumental break. Without a band to look at, I guess you have to do something for the camera.

Jo-Ann Campbell perhaps fares the worst of the bunch for the camera in "Go Johnny Go!". She performs "Momma, Can I Go Out" in a heavily starched dress that doesn't compliment her movement to the song. You could say her spot is choreographed- she puts a coin in a juke box during the tune- and the unnaturalness of the whole thing detracts from the spicy vocals Campbell delivers on the sound track.

Of all the acts showcased in "Go Johnny Go!", I particularly enjoyed getting familiar with the group the Cadillacs. They seemed to be a cross between a music act and a comedy act, wearing costumes and acting out the parts in the songs. They're hams alright, but at least they give themselves something to do on stage. Two of the guys are wearing cop uniforms for "Jay Walker" and then they're wearing work clothes and pushing brooms for "Please, Mr. Johnson." Both tunes are lively and upbeat musically, addressing common urban themes and their physical antics are pleasantly amusing.

Perhaps the most significant appearance in "Go Johnny Go!", however, is by Ritchie Valens. This is Valens' only movie appearance and he proves to be a convincing rocker, despite being consigned to performing "Ooh My Head" for Freed, Berry and a table full of giggling teenage girls. The lip synching element here is glaring, because a key part to the Valens recording is the driving drum part, and there's no drummer to be seen in the movie. Still, Valens shows spunk, looking like he's really digging into that guitar around his neck and roughing up his vocals a little like Little Richard.

But don't forget there're some Chuck Berry performances here too, including a "television taping" of "Memphis, Tenn." and a "jam session" version of "Little Queenie."

Berry does his trademark "duck" walk- with a wink- at the end of "Memphis." For "Little Queenie," Freed is sitting in on drums and once again "Go Johnny Go!" fails to hide the lip synching- he is nowhere near actually playing the rhythm of the record, his drum hits completely off from those on the soundtrack. Fortunately, Berry is such an active performer- even when goofing to a prerecorded song- that there's plenty of distraction from Freed's lackluster contribution.

There's plenty here to indicate that "Go Johnny Go!" is really Berry's movie. The whole thing starts out with a close-up of Berry's guitar and hands while he's performing his hit "Johnny B. Goode." Unfortunately, Hollywood decided Berry's record wasn't enough and they added blaring horn parts too, but at least Berry is featured from the opening credits.

Add in that Berry is also a central character in "Go Johnny Go!"- one who is hip and wise to the happening music scene- as well as a seasoned featured performer. This puts Berry in the audience's eye for a lot of the movie- much more so than dour Mister Rock and Roll Alan Freed- and it all works in his favor.

Directed by Paul Landres...1959...75 min...featuring Alan Freed, Jimmy Clanton, Chuck Berry, Jackie Wilson, Ritchie Valens, Cadillacs, Jo-Ann Campbell, Flamingos, Harvey Fuqua, Eddie Cochran, Jimmy Cavallo.

1959 Go Johnny Go songs

"MY LOVE IS STRONG"

Performed by Jimmy Clanton

"IT TAKES A LONG TIME"

Performed by Jimmy Clanton

"SHIP ON A STORMY SEA"

Performed by Jimmy Clanton

"ANGEL FACE"

Performed by Jimmy Clanton

"LITTLE QUEENIE"

Performed by Chuck Berry

"MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE"

Performed by Chuck Berrys

"JOHNNY B. GOODE"

Performed by Chuck Berry

"PLAYMATES"

Performed by Sandy Stewart

"HEAVENLY FATHER"

Performed by Sandy Stewart

"OOH MY HEAD"

Performed by Ritchie Valens

"YOU BETTER KNOW IT"

Performed by Jackie Wilson

"TEENAGE HEAVEN"

Performed by Eddie Cochran

"JAY WALKER"

Performed by The Cadillacs

"PLEASE, MR. JOHNSON"

Performed by The Cadillacs

"JUMP, CHILDREN"

Performed by The Flamingoes

"MOMMA, CAN I GO OUT"

Performed by Jo-Ann Campbell

"DON'T BE AFRAID TO LOVE ME"

Performed by Harvey

"ONCE AGAIN"

Performed by Jimmy Clanton and Sandy Stewart

Jukebox Rhythm

Directed by Arthur Dreifuss...1959...81 min...Jack Jones, Earl Grant, Johnny Otis, Treniers, Nit Wits.

Gidget

Directed by Paul Wendkos...1959...95 min...featuring Sandra Dee, James Darren, Cliff Robertson, Four Preps.

Hound Dog Man

Directed by Don Siegel...1959...87 min...featuring Fabian, Dodie Stevens.