

## THE TALKIES

by Ben Yagoda



### Rock-and-Roll Grandeur

I'll tell you 'bout the magic  
that will free your soul,  
But it's like trying to tell a stranger  
about rock-and-roll.

So sang the Lovin' Spoonful, back in a time when it seemed that the music really could set America free, until everyone was gyrating to the same beat, not talking about it—because you couldn't tell a stranger about rock-and-roll—but *feeling* it, man, and the world would be made anew.

It didn't work. Rock, which began almost a quarter-century ago as a broad-based, energized reaction to a socially repressed time, and had its moment of hubris in the sixties, is now firmly entrenched in its decadence. To be sure, the American pop song has been irreversibly changed, and good rock is still being made, but the music is no longer anything more than that. The current rock panoply consists of mellow crooners, balding ex-superstars, depersonalized and mindless disco outfits, strung-out heavy metalists, and various other contingents, each appealing to an ever-narrower audience. As for pink-haired punk, or "the New Wave," many see it as a revitalizing force, a return to the energy, simplicity, and anger of rock's roots; others argue, perhaps more persuasively, that Johnny Rotten, Meat Loaf, the Dictators, and company are a glorified death rattle.

As a rule, cultural phenomena begin to be viewed from a historical perspective only when they have lost their currency, and so it is fitting that we are now being treated to a spate of movies about the rock era. (More are on the way—*Grease*, *Hair*, *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, *The Buddy Holly Story*, and, no doubt, others.) To proceed chronologically, *American Hot Wax*, set in 1959, is about Alan Freed, the Ohio-born disc jockey who is credited with coining the term "rock-

and-roll" and with bringing the music to the public's attention, and who was the principal victim of the payola scandals of the early sixties. According to *Hot Wax*, Freed was the innocent victim of an evil coalition from officialdom which combined to stop the first-anniversary rock show at the Brooklyn Paramount (the film's climax), and then sent him out of the music business and to his early death in 1964. Accepting money from record companies was a universal practice among DJs, contend director Floyd Mutrux and screenwriter John Kaye; the establishment was really afraid of the sexual energy released by rock and the prospect of "black kids and white kids boogeying together." The unspoken but strongly implied conclusion is that, *vide* the sixties, we lost the battle but won the war, that Freed died so that rock might live.

*Hot Wax* has been upbraided by some for whitewashing Freed, misrepresenting his foes, and getting the details all wrong. A rock journalist friend of mine, on the other hand, tells me that the film's facts are substantially correct, since Freed's ex-manager was a consultant (although Freed's ex-manager probably isn't the most objective source in the world). But finally, it doesn't matter. Fictions, even if they are based on real events and people, should not be judged on historical accuracy, on how much Brian Keith looks like Teddy Roosevelt, but on their own terms, as works of art.

On that score, *American Hot Wax* fails badly. The story is shapeless. The secondary characters are unreal, especially the pin-striped heavies. The closest Mutrux and Kaye come to interpreting an eminently interpretable decade is showing us pompadours, *Mad* magazines, narrow lapels, big fins, and other fifties' artifacts. The script offers no insight into Freed's devotion to rock or the reasons for his appeal. As for "the music" (as it's repeatedly called), supposedly the source of all the commotion, we are fed the simple-

minded idea that the kids just want to have a good time, the grown-ups want to stop them, but the music's bigger than them all. This credo is expressed in a series of numbing, "significant" lines, ranging from a budding songwriter's "I never had anything till I found the music" to Freed's climactic "You can close the show. You can stop me. But you can never stop rock-and-roll!"

Two things make the film watchable, and occasionally something more than that. The first is Tim McIntire as Freed. McIntire does a hundred things right: the Buddha-like grin when listening to the latest release; the slight Midwestern twang; the straight, almost square mike style (as opposed to the fast-talking hype we expect from AM jocks); the portly imitation of Chuck Berry's duckwalk during the Paramount concert. His performance gives us a glimpse of a far better film that might have been. So do Carl Earl Weaver, Al Chalk, Sam Harkness, and Arnold McCuller as the Chesterfields, a fictional black *a cappella* group "discovered" by Freed. They not only make fine music, but their spirit communicates what distinguished fifties rock: the way anyone, so long as he had three other guys and a bathroom, subway station, or streetcorner, could create it. When Freed, secretly watching the Chesterfields rehearse, murmurs, "That's it, that's it," we may be put off by the portentous way the sentiment is expressed, but we can't help agreeing.

*I Wanna Hold Your Hand*, another New York period piece, is somewhat less ambitious than *American Hot Wax*, and is to that extent more successful. The year is 1964, on the day of the Beatles' initial appearance on the "Ed Sullivan Show." The Fab Four, cleverly, are not shown (not above the waist anyway); the focus is on six suburban teenagers who are determined to catch a glimpse of their heroes, or die trying. Along the way, they manage to carry out every hotel sight-gag in the book:

Ben Yagoda is a free-lance writer living in New York.

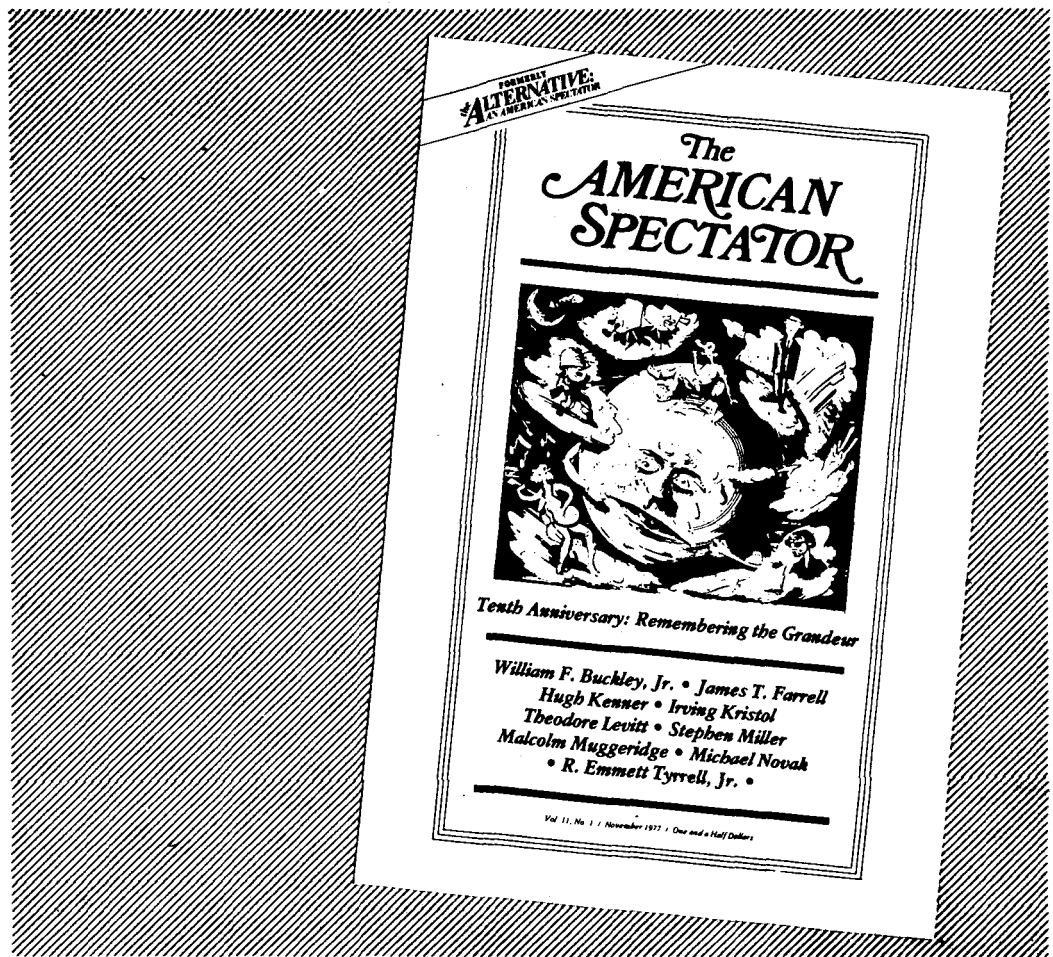
get locked in broom closet, get stuck in elevator, hide in closet of someone else's room, and, sure enough, knock over waiter carrying tray.

In the intelligence department, *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* is somewhere between "Happy Days" and *American Graffiti*. For Robert Zemeckis, who directed, and Bob Gale, with whom he collaborated on the script, Beatlemania is mostly an excuse for making people behave in a remarkably silly fashion. The only character who reflects on it is the obligatory, greased-down Fonz-figure; he says, rather sensibly, "It's like a goddamn disease, for Christ's sake." Zemeckis and Gale, when they're thinking at all, seem to disagree: They show Beatlemania as a benevolent force, something like Prospero, that brings together three pairs of lovers and convinces one girl to dump her stuffy fiancé. Moreover, when the greaser tries to sabotage the Sullivan show's transmitter, lightning destroys his hatchet. So much for cultural analysis.

But if *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* lacks intelligence, it has wit, which in the movies often translates into an eye for the telling detail. Two examples: In the opening scene, we see a worker changing the third letter in the group's name on a marquee from an "e" to an "a"; and the off-camera patter emitting from the Beatles exactly captures their anarchic, schoolboyish good humor. What is more important, and remarkable for a rookie director like Zemeckis, the film is put together masterfully. Almost all the comic bits work; the pacing is exemplary; the look is superb (except for some street scenes that couldn't have been shot anywhere east of Nevada); and the one-track performances (especially Wendie Jo Sperber's, as the most fanatic Beatlephile of all, and Bobby DiCicco's, as guess who) are stylized to just the right degree. My only complaint, aside from the paucity of substance, is that the commercial preceding the Beatles' live TV appearance—during which two of the characters have to get crosstown—takes up three minutes of screen time, which must violate some Aristotelean unity.

*FM*, besides being a rock movie, belongs to a burgeoning genre that one might christen Cinematic Institutional Phenomenology. To make a CIP film, all you need do is take an enterprise—city (*Nashville*), minor-league hockey team (*Slap Shot*), alternative weekly (*Between the Lines*), car wash (*Car Wash*), or now progressive-rock radio station—come up with the flimsiest of plots, provide a ubiquitous score, and set the camera a-rollin'.

To make a good CIP film, however, you also need: a firm directorial hand, a theme that somehow unifies the material, and a set of interesting and/or wacky characterizations; and here *FM* strikes out. The only character to hold our attention is Mother (Eileen Brennan), a late-night DJ on QSKY-FM who suspiciously resembles a certain New York City night-owl; she



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simultaneously needs and is repelled by the narcissistic drivel she plays, by "five hours a night, ego-tripping in this toy store." The brilliant Martin Mull, playing an extension of his Barth Gimble on the TV series "America 2Night," is strangely subdued, as if he mistakenly thought Ezra Sacks' script was meaty enough to eliminate the need for comic exaggeration. Station manager Jeff Dugan (Michael Brandon)—Alan Freed's squeaky-clean 1978 counterpart—is on screen longer than anyone else, but you'd never know it.

The real virtue of CIP films is that by stressing the texture of day-to-day life, they can avoid the bugbear of American cinema—melodramatic, contrived plots. Not so *FM*. One strand of the story—QSKY's attempt to steal a Linda Ronstadt concert from its rival—while dull and confusing, is excusable on the grounds that it gives Miss Ronstadt the opportunity to do three numbers on camera. The other part has to do with the pressures put on QSKY by its parent corporation and the station's resistance (a very popular kind of theme among CIP films, which is interesting when you consider the economics of the movie business). Granted, the point of contention—whether Dugan should be forced to play ads for the Army—is a legitimate problem; the main FM station in New

York does so, and the spots are glaringly out of place. But the way the story is told is so full of clichés, bad jokes, and conventions that haven't been new since the thirties that any audience interest is quickly lost. The clincher is the ending, in which the czar of the corporation (the heavies are middle managers, one in pinstripes and the other in plaid-on-plaid) finds out about the dispute, admires QSKY's spunk, and gives it freedom. The idea that the very rich are always fair and sensible is hackneyed and wrong enough to begin with; making it the conclusion of a "now" film is laughable.

*The Last Waltz* is Martin Scorsese's documentary account of the farewell concert given by the rock group The Band in November 1976. If you overlook some weighty remarks about "changes" and "celebration" in the filmed talks with group members, and Scorsese's inept interviewing technique (which consists of either turning immediately to the metaphorical or repeating the answer he has just received as another question), *The Last Waltz* is probably the best rock-concert movie ever. Some credit should go to Scorsese, who pulls no funny stuff during the concert, and who, with the assistance of no fewer than six directors of photography, has provided exquisite light-

ing and solid camerawork. But most should go to The Band and their all-star guests—particularly Joni Mitchell, Van Morrison, and Bob Dylan—for making some fine music.

The Band is a peculiar case. Originally a rhythm-and-blues bar band in the early sixties, they first became known when they backed up Dylan in 1965-1966, and achieved wide recognition with the release of three excellent records in 1968-1970. Their tight music was a unique amalgam of the sounds of America; their lyrics came from deep within the national consciousness (this was all the more remarkable, since four of the five Band members are Canadian).

Since then, however, their output has been so limited that one number, "Up on Cripple Creek," has shown up on five of their albums. And though they release an occasional uninspired album, they don't perform live, and are no longer a musical force of any consequence. I blame this premature demise not on The Band itself, but on the form it chose: Rock-and-rollers, with only a handful of exceptions, have tended to burn out very quickly. Theirs is a music that worships energy and spontaneity, and neither quality is notorious for longevity. The sad fact remains that magic, whether you believe in it or not, can't last forever. □

## CAPITOL IDEAS

by Tom Bethell



## Espionage in Outer Georgetown

Walking across downtown Washington the other day, I soon realized that I was being followed by a dog. Nothing too obvious, like a bloodhound with ears hanging and tongue lolling, but a harmless-looking, shaggy sheepdog frisking along twenty yards in my wake. When I stopped to admire a window display of summer fashions, the dog would stop too and affect interest in a fire hydrant.

This was not a good sign. I know a "tail" when I see one. I turned smartly into Sholls' Colonial Cafeteria on Connecticut

*Tom Bethell is Washington editor of Harper's and contributing editor of the Washington Monthly.*

Avenue, a haven for spies, mutterers, and lip-readers—assorted solitary sitters who communicate with ease at a distance. I feel much at home in the place. It is possible to find a quiet corner and stay out of reach of stray electronic bombardment for a few hours at a stretch.

Boris, Peterson, and the Mafia Mother were at their stations. So were one or two well-known Investigative Journalists, who I fear have this covert operation under surveillance and are about to blow a rude whistle. I nodded surreptitiously in Peterson's direction. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Boris withdrawing behind his "cover"—a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* he has been carrying around for

weeks. I joined in the general muttering for a while and drank several cups of coffee.

Giving Messrs. Stein and Wood the slip, I walked out quickly, adjusting the package under my arm. The dog was still there, unwarily dozing on the sidewalk. I grappled with its collar before it realized I was upon it. The nametag read "Junket," and directed finders to return same to one "Les Aspin" at a Georgetown address. I patted the dog on the head (which I realized was most likely "bugged") so as not to alarm him and thus betray my discovery to the chaps with headphones undoubtedly listening in a few blocks away.

I checked with my sources when I got home and found out that this "Les Aspin"