

Summer 2024 Poster Exhibit:

BEATLES, SWEET TRANSVESTITES & SINGING NUNS – A TRIBUTE TO MUSICALS, OR, “I FEEL A SONG COMING ON...”

Music IS the Universal language. Everyone around the world responds to music, and everyone is capable of making music, even if it's just humming to yourself. Music has been part of movies since they were invented. In the days of Silent Film, theaters would provide live accompaniment on the organ or the piano, and some theaters would have sing-a-longs where lyrics would be projected on the screen.

The very first sound film had a musical theme, THE JAZZ SINGER, starring Al Jolson. Musicals have been part of film history ever since, featuring popular singing stars of the day, such as Judy Garland, Bing Crosby, Howard Keel, Doris Day, Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Barbra Streisand, and so on. In more recent times, the

traditional musical having a storyline is seen less often. Nowadays, we're more likely to see filmed versions of live concerts from personalities like Taylor Swift. We also have bio-pics of famous singers, like ROCKETMAN and BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY, which will include their greatest hits.

The Musical Genre will never die, because the bottom line is, Music makes us feel good! It can be like an intoxicating drug. So if you'll pardon me, I feel a song coming on...



Barry Yuen, Poster Collector & Writer

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THE LAST WALTZ (1978)

A documentary by Martin Scorsese of the Farewell concert given by THE BAND, who had such hits as “Up On Cripple Creek”, “The Weight”, and “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down.” Multiple guest stars appear, like Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Ringo Starr, and others, so at times it feels like The Band itself is being pushed aside in their own show. In later years, stories began to surface about tensions within The Band, and how it was not a unanimous decision for them to end things with this concert. In fact, they would re-form, but without Robbie Robertson.

TOMMY (1973)

The very first “Rock Opera” with music by The Who. It was brought to film by none other than Ken Russell, whose philosophy of “Nothing succeeds like excess” is a perfect match for the material. Traumatized by the murder of his father, Tommy becomes deaf, dumb, and blind, is abused by crazy relatives, achieves fame as a “Pinball Wizard” and eventually becomes a Messiah figure, until his disgruntled followers turn on him. Ann-Margaret had been absent from musicals for several years before she made this movie. Superstar Elton John makes an appearance, as well as Tina Turner in a memorable, hallucinatory scene. Russell’s favourite actor Oliver Reed is here, even though his singing is not up to snuff, and Jack Nicholson (who is also a non-singer) is cast for his star power.

BLUE HAWAII (1961)

I first saw Blue Hawaii on TV. When I tuned in, Elvis was swimming in the ocean, when he jumps into a canoe and starts playing his guitar. Immediately I thought, you can’t play a guitar with wet hands. It just feels gross. Everytime there was a song the dubbing was obvious. The whole sound quality

changed, and the vocals had this hollow sound to them. Hawaii seems very American-ized in this movie. The only natives you see are Elvis's beach bum pals and some servants. It has echoes of colonization. At one point Elvis presents his girlfriend's mother with a music box (from Austria – the movie tries to blur the line with real life by having Elvis playing a guy who just got out of the Army). The music box plays “Can't Help Falling in Love with you.” Elvis helpfully sings along. I wonder if this is the song's first appearance in Elvis's career, or if they recycled the song for use in the movie. Anyway, the woman playing the mother has the difficult task of having to continuously react to the song as Elvis sings it to her. Apparently the mother is supposed to be a native, since she talks with an accent. Elvis's mother, meanwhile, is played by Angela Lansbury, talking with a Southern Accent. One scene ends with her husband threatening to throttle her, which we're supposed to find funny. Different times! Still though, it seemed to be better than some of the other Elvis movies which came later. Elvis has a quotable line: “I'm Young, Healthy and Not Too Stupid!”

STOP MAKING SENSE (1983)

Often described as “The Greatest Concert Movie Ever Made”, it was recently re-released for its 40th Anniversary, and was an even bigger hit with audiences. If you weren't a fan of TALKING HEADS before, you will be by the time the movie is over. The music is just so infectious, and captures such pure joy in living. But the image that leaps to everyone's mind whenever the movie is mentioned is the sight of David Byrne's “Big Suit” which was a kind of parody of Japanese theatre, where, it was explained to David, “Everything is Bigger than Life.” And then there's the scene where he dances with a tall lamp, which seems to have been inspired by Fred Astaire.

HELP! (1965)

Since *A HARD DAY'S NIGHT* was a huge hit, it was only natural that the studio would want a follow-up. Richard Lester would be their director again, and this time the budget was increased so they had the luxury of shooting in colour. But there was still an attitude prevailing in upper circles that The Beatles' time in the spotlight was limited and would soon finish, so they should get another movie out as quickly as possible. How wrong they were! George Harrison recalls a lackadaisical attitude about their safety on the set: "They took us to Austria, took us up a mountain, gave us our boots –that nobody laced up- gave us our skis, said 'Turn Over. Take One. Action.' And gave us a push." Songs include *HELP!*, *YOU'VE GOT TO HIDE YOUR LOVE AWAY*; *YOU'RE GOING TO LOSE THAT GIRL*; *THE NIGHT BEFORE*; *ANOTHER GIRL*, *TICKET TO RIDE* and *I NEED YOU*. The film is marred a bit by the xenophobic attitude the script takes towards Eastern religion. Ironically, Eastern religion would enrapture George Harrison very shortly after.

ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE FOREVER (1970)

In the world of music, few people have become as iconic as Barbra Streisand. The movie version of *FUNNY GIRL* (1968) showed us a Star being born, although this was not an overnight success. She had spent years performing in clubs and making television appearances before playing *FUNNY GIRL* on Broadway. At the time, it was not 100% guaranteed that she would get to do the movie version, because she was still considered an unknown. But she did, and the rest is history. Not all of her movies have been great, but her career has been very durable. *ON A CLEAR DAY* was not one of her biggest hits, or even particularly well received on first release, but it still has points of interest. Jack Nicholson has a small part in the movie, but at this point in time, Streisand's star eclipses his. There was a lack of chemistry between Streisand and her leading man, Yves Montand, who was an odd casting choice. Barbra's rendition of *ON A CLEAR DAY* at the film's end is breathtaking.

A HARD DAY'S NIGHT (1964)

The Beatles captured on film just as their fame was sky-rocketing, and they were writing some of their best songs, although their standards remained pretty high throughout their career. Apart from the title song, we also get CAN'T BUY ME LOVE, I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER, IF I FELL, I'M HAPPY JUST TO DANCE WITH YOU, and others. Since The Beatles were not actors, the script tried to present them as they naturally were, rather than create characters for them to play.

THE SINGING NUN (1967)

After THE SOUND OF MUSIC became a mammoth hit, Hollywood decided what the public wanted was more Singing Nuns, and so this movie was greenlighted. (We even had Sally Field as THE FLYING NUN on TV, but she didn't sing.) Like THE SOUND OF MUSIC, this movie is based on someone's real life story. Debbie Reynolds plays Sister Anne, a nun who reluctantly finds fame when she is "discovered" and records her original songs, which become hits. "Dominique" is her most famous song. But in the end she turns her back on show business and returns to her calling. The movie ends with her working in an African mission, but she is still surrounded by music. After all, Music is the Universal Language. I saw this at a very young age (I must have been 6 or 7) and was very moved by it. It has been a contributing factor to my lifelong devotion to music. Well, this and The Beatles, of course! The trend continued when 70's Superstar Helen Reddy played a Singing Nun in AIRPORT 1975. Singing Nuns proved to still be a sure-fire hit when Whoopi Goldberg starred in SISTER ACT a few decades later.

PURPLE RAIN (1984)

If you had a TV set in 1984, you would have seen Prince's music video for *WHEN DOVES CRY* about a million times, since they played it constantly on Much Music and MTV. So, when his movie *PURPLE RAIN* came out, there was already an awareness of who Prince was. The story is semi-autobiographical, and it contains Prince's best songs. Prince plays a fictionalized version of himself called "The Kid" who's struggling to make a name for himself in music. But we all know "The Kid" is Prince – I mean, who else would dress like that, with the purple outfits and the fancy ruffles? And when he plays what is obviously a Hit Song but the response from the club manager is negative, you think to yourself, "Really? You didn't think that was good?" There's a sub-plot about The Kid's abusive father which gives the movie a serious, unpleasant tone. And hopefully that part wasn't true to Prince's real life.

PHANTOM OF THE PARADISE (1974)

Just a couple of years before he made *CARRIE*, Brian DePalma was building his reputation with off-beat horror movies like this one. *PHANTOM* is an updating of the *PHANTOM OF THE OPERA* story, set in the contemporary world of rock and roll. Paul Williams provides great songs which give a snapshot of the 1974 music scene, paying homage and sometimes gently parodying such acts as The Beach Boys, Alice Cooper, KISS, and The Carpenters. DePalma's style is already established, with certain scenes shot in split-screen, and references to films of the past, especially Hitchcock's. He would bring these same things to directing *CARRIE*. Jessica Harper, on the basis of her performance in this film, would land the lead role in *SUSPIRIA*.

THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW (1975)

What can you say about this movie that hasn't been said before? As is well known, it was originally done as a stage show in England, but when it was made into a movie, it was a huge flop. It was only a few years later that a cult began to form around it, and with it a ritual of audience participation. It is the grand-daddy of Midnight Movies. Having it shown at Midnight enhanced its appeal to the cult audience and set it apart from the mainstream. Gay audiences embraced its themes of owning one's sexuality and being proud of it, but the movie appealed to everybody, and the changes that Brad & Janet undergo seem to be telling us that there's a little bit of Frank'n'Furter in all of us, if we can only let go of our inhibitions. The movie gives us permission to let go, which may account for its wild popularity. As long as people still go to movies, ROCKY HORROR will be part of pop culture forever. Let's do The Time Warp again!

THE ROSE (1979)

As much as I like Bette Midler, watching THE ROSE is one of the most masochistic experiences I've ever had in a lifetime of movie-watching, as we are asked to share in the pain felt by the main character, Rose. The character is supposedly based on Janis Joplin, and it is, in a loose way. Yes, Janis, like Rose in this movie, liked her booze and her drugs, came from a small town and achieved fame in the hippie culture of the 60's, supposedly had bi-sexual experiences, and died young of a heroin overdose. Everything else is fiction. In this movie, Rose seems to be in constant misery, as people in her life hurt her and abandon her, then come back so they can do it again! For someone making their first movie, Midler is astonishingly good, and was nominated for an Oscar. She didn't win, probably because the Academy thought that a singer playing a singer was no great stretch. The songs are great, though, and a couple of them even charted, putting Midler in the Top 40 with "When a Man Loves a Woman" and the bittersweet title song "The Rose".

A STAR IS BORN (1954)

Another musical figure who has a cult following is Judy Garland. Garland was undoubtedly one of the Greatest singers of the 20th Century, and one of the biggest stars of Hollywood's Golden Age. She made a ton of musicals in the 30's and 40's, but her most famous role was as Dorothy in THE WIZARD OF OZ. The grueling schedule of the Hollywood system gave her an addiction to drugs (pills to wake her up and keep her working, and pills to make her sleep), and mental issues due to stress made Hollywood consider her unemployable later in her life. A STAR IS BORN was devised as a "Comeback" vehicle for Judy, since she hadn't made a movie in several years. The production had some difficulties and cost overruns, mainly because the studio decided midway into filming to make it a widescreen movie, which meant that all the work they had done would have to be re-shot. But once it was finished, the film's excellence shone through, and Judy would be nominated for an Oscar for her efforts. But she was sabotaged by the studio, who decided to re-cut the movie to make it shorter, so theaters could get more screenings per day. But this decision damaged the film. Audience interest dropped off, and after being considered a shoo-in for the Oscar, Judy experienced humiliation when she lost. Attempts have been made to restore the original cut, but some footage has been lost forever. It's still acknowledged as a classic film, and one of the major titles in Judy's career, having provided her with one of her signature songs, "The Man who Got Away."

A STAR IS BORN was remade in 2018 as a vehicle for Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper and was a massive hit.

CABARET (1972)

Like FUNNY GIRL for Barbra Streisand, CABARET was a Star-making film for Liza Minelli. Liza, the daughter of Judy Garland, had already been onstage (performing duets with Judy, but she also had her own starring role in FLORA THE RED MENACE) and had done a couple of previous films, but it was CABARET that brought her world-wide fame and acclaim, and made her a Star in her own right, apart from her famous mother. Liza had missed out on playing the part of Sally Bowles when CABARET was a Broadway show, but she really angled for the part in the movie version, and it paid off big time. The songs from CABARET (MAYBE THIS TIME, MONEY MONEY, and, of course, CABARET) would come to define Liza's career identity for years to come. The subject matter, the rise of Nazi Germany while the main characters carry on with their lives, oblivious of the steadily encroaching menace, was serious stuff for a musical, which in Hollywood history had always been lightweight, frivolous entertainment.