

To what extent is self-indulgence entertaining?

Barbra Streisand wants us to gaze upon her, awestruck by her talent, in *A Star is Born*. This has been her goal for most of her career, but only recently has self-consciousness overwhelmed her ability.

This kind of show-biz self congratulation is not comfortable with modern trends toward low key underplaying, however. A showboating performer like Streisand demands her own world; she can't slip easily into a pre-established

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one. This split accounts for the hybrid quality of the new rock remake of *A Star is Born*, produced by Streisand and her house-mate, Jon Peters.

Inundated by the ad campaign and pre-release publicity, one could well expect the movie to be a huge, vulgar laughfest of unintentional gaffes. Unfortunately, that's not the case. What we find instead is an externally overblown, internally piddling vanity production, dedicated to the greater glory of Barbra Streisand.

Originally filmed in 1937 by William Wellman from a script by Dorothy Parker and Wellman, *A Star is Born* has been a venerable

vehicle for some years. It was musically remade by George Cukor in 1954, with Judy Garland and James Mason, adapted by Moss Hart. The story was far from fresh then and is positively moldy by now.

The new version moves from Hollywood to rock stardom, but follows the details of its predecessors. Fading big-time star (Kris Kristofferson) meets promising young talent (Streisand), nurtures her career, marries her, is overshadowed by her, and finally kills himself to put them both out of their misery.

Lotsa laughs? Hardly. What has given this maudlin fable appeal through the years is the opportunity it provides for actors. Such meaty roles! The 1954 version achieved near-mythic status by joining this story to Judy Garland's comeback; Garland blazed through the corn and triumphed, aided by James Mason's superb work as the star on the skids.

Streisand's attraction to this material is understandable. She has a flair for show-stopping finales and smiling-through-heartbreak, as she showed way back in *Funny Girl* and in her splendid weeper, *The Way We Were*. This time out, though, she's overdrawn on her talents. One can't escape her flaws, as the entire movie revolves around her. From conception, to executive producer chores, to "musical con-

cepts," it's HER SHOW.

She irritates from the start. Introduced singing in a nightclub with two black girls, she is dreadfully coy, yet takes center stage as if by divine right. Kristofferson spots her, and smitten by her voice and saucy personality (yawn), follows her home.

Streisand's figurative winking at the audience through all this is unbearable. Every wisecrack, every expression is gauged for effect. Whatever happened to spontaneity?

When he manages to wrest the camera away from Streisand's manic grasp, Kristofferson does surprisingly well as the doped-up alcoholic, burned-out star. He's believably self-destructive and confused, a raspy-voiced, erratic has-been.

Old-timer Robert Surtees sweats a little to be hip, but his photography is always adequate. Director-screenwriter Frank Pierson (he wrote *Dog Day Afternoon*) apparently had some ideas about how to treat rock stardom, but blows them all in the first 15 minutes, after which he dozes.

Reinforcing the idiocy of doing this in rock milieu is Paul Williams' score. Williams belongs in *Bugsy Malone*, not in rock, and it takes more than twangy electric guitars to hide this fact.

Pierson and Streisand re-do the famous Academy Awards scene, where drunk husband humiliates himself and loyal wife, and place it at the Grammys. The Grammys?! Oh yeah, these people know rock.

Streisand doesn't flinch from comparisons with show biz greats. She took on Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl* and *Funny Lady*, and here she challenges Judy Garland. If only she wouldn't force comparisons with herself. Her live-recorded finale here is lifted from *Funny Girl*, as are so many plot elements.

Judging from accounts of the filming, Streisand is a temperamental perfectionist, convinced of what is and isn't right for her. The sad thing about this sorry enterprise is that her confidence in herself is so misplaced. Instead of rousing us, she distances us. Streisand is a remarkably talented woman possessed of admirable drive. How disappointing to find when left to her own devices, she comes up with *A Star is Born*.

Eagles, Joe Walsh make nice blend

Joe Walsh has a new back-up band. They're called the Eagles. Walsh adds another electric-guitar punch to their sound, and fits his unique vocal style into their celebrated high harmonies, but he doesn't substantially change their sound. This is unfortunate for this new Eagles release, *Hotel California*, could just as easily been called *One of These Nights Vol. II*.

That they have not changed their music much since their last album is not unusual, it could merely mean that with their fifth album they are settling into a musical territory they call their own. This is unusual, but not unexpected.

The Eagles have lost much of their country roots with the departure of Bernie Leadon, guitarist and writer, and a key figure in the cohesive management of the group in their early days. The Eagles "made it" with a string of country flavored hit singles from their first album, "Take it Easy," "Witchy Woman," and "Peaceful Easy Feeling," and thus became, for better or for worse, a country-rock band. Bassist Randy Meisner wrote some of the country material for the band, "Midnight Flyer" was one, but it was Bernie Leadon, ex-Flying Burrito Brother, who contributed the lion's share of country influence.

Leadon lost his touch after *Desperado* and the songwriting team of Glenn Frey/Don Henley took up the slack. "My Man," Leadon's touching tribute to the late Gram Parsons, went unnoticed on *On the Border* when

"Best of My Love" hit the airwaves. On *One of These Nights* Leadon was reduced to singing harmony and one unusual instrumental, "Journey of the Sorcerer." And then he was gone.

The Eagles are left with Meisner to hold up the country end of their sound, although guitarist Don Felder emerges here with one distinctly country tune. Whatever influence Joe Walsh brings it most certainly is not country western!

Now *Hotel California* is really a very good album; the instrumentation is solid with all of the right flourishes; the songwriting, dominated by Henley/Frey, is as strong as ever; and the harmonies are, of course, flawless, but everything is just the same. Everything moves, but nothing is alive, as one writer once put it.

So far as talent goes, Walsh is just the man to fill the empty guitar spot with the Eagles. Don Felder accompanied Walsh on his last solo tour and the resulting live album contains some very fine duels that snap, crackle and pop! Walsh returns the favor here with some of the movingest music he has ever made. His performances on "Life In The Fast Lane," and "Victim of Love," are dazzling exhibits of guitar pyrotechnics.

The title track of this album, sounding eerily like "One of These Nights," is one of the best songs to be released by the Eagles in quite some time. "Hotel California" has some surrealistic-mystic overtones in the lyrics, something that has survived with the Eagles since their first album.

"Her mind is Tiffany-twisted
She got the Mercedes bends
She got a lot of pretty, pretty boys
That she calls friends."

So, the Eagles, with Joe Walsh, chalk up another one. With a built-in hit single, "New Kid In Town," his album will get right up there with "Best of My Love," solid gold and the Eagles will finally have found their place in the musical ladder: Eagles Territory.

When you have almost made up your mind on the state of Eagles art, listen to "The Last Resort." There is something in the way Don Henley sings

"We satisfy our endless needs
And justify our blood deeds
In the name of Destiny
And in the name of God."

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