

Rock 'n' roll film avoids hard issues

Alan Freed was a Cleveland disc jockey who in the mid-Fifties moved to radio station WINS in New York and for the next few years functioned as the czar of a new popular music form that was sweeping the nation. Freed is justly famous for three accomplishments. He coined the term "rock 'n' roll." He introduced urban white audiences to the sounds of rhythm and blues and country and western music. And he was the central figure in the payola scandals that virtually killed rock 'n' roll at the end of the decade.

His injection of black music into the mainstream of popular culture was a more significant accomplishment than we remember today. Whatever the failures of racial integration in other areas, popular music represents possibly the most successful fusion of black and white cultures.

Such was not the case in Alan Freed's time. Countless black artists struggled to stay alive from gig to gig while clean-cut non-talents like Pat Boone made millions from lily-white "cover" re-

leases of such R & B songs as "Tutti Frutti" and "Long Tall Sally."

Nervous producers refused to allow photographs of black groups

it repeatedly backs off from addressing the hard issues the subject matter raises.

Even this black-and-white strategy could have resulted in an

consistently.

It suggests them, but it settles for stereotyping the bad guys and canonizing the good guys. The good guys are the disc jockeys, songwriters, performers, promoters and producers who are the keepers of the rock 'n' roll flame. The bad guys are the cops, the D.A.s and the parents who want to snuff out that flame.

Hot Wax abounds with nice touches: Tim McIntire's restrained performance as Freed, a tired man in a plaid jacket and bow tie, strangely free of the racial paranoia of the Fifties, dedicated to rock 'n' roll, intent on martyrdom because he will not sacrifice his principles for expediency; Moosie Drier as the 12-year-old president of the Buddy Holly fan club, who, in a genuinely affecting scene, goes on Freed's show to memorialize his dead hero; the camaraderie of the disc jockeys, virtual social outcasts bound together by the rightness of their enterprise; the streetcorner singing groups who harmonize in alleys hoping Freed will walk by and discover them.

The recording studio scenes are especially gratifying, because of both the loving nod at the conventions of the movie musical and the hint of the real excitement of creating music.

Nice touches aside, the climactic riot at Freed's rock 'n' roll stage show, incited by policemen intent on nailing Freed, exposes the shallowness of the film's concept. The audience greets Freed's curtain speech — "You can close the show; you can stop me. But you'll never stop rock 'n' roll. Don't you know that?" — with the derision it so richly deserves. But any film that offers a look at a remarkably well-preserved Frankie Ford singing his rock 'n' roll classic "Sea Cruise" deserves to be seen.



By BILL LINGLE American Hot Wax

to appear on their albums, as though we couldn't tell the Coasters were black by listening to them. It seems a ridiculous pretense in retrospect, but rock 'n' roll was born in a time when blacks were seldom allowed to share public schools with whites. In that atmosphere, Alan Freed's relentless promoting of black music seemed a courageous thing indeed.

It's all a great subject for a wonderful movie, but, unfortunately, *American Hot Wax* is not that movie. *Hot Wax* is not a bad film; in many ways it is expertly made. But

excellent film; after all, it is a basic technique of movies to simplify and exaggerate. But *American Hot Wax* has a split personality. In its heart it is a B picture in which the kids are just out to have a good time and the adult world's only function is to try to repress them. On its surface it is a big budget Paramount release that is as technically slick as a heavy expense account can make it. This tension between a trashy core and a classy surface is occasionally used in the service of the film, but director Floyd Mutrux simply does not have the skills to bring it off

Bunuel driven from avant-garde

Superficially, time and history seem to have driven 77 year old Luis Bunuel from the avant-garde in his most recent film, *That Obscure Object of Desire*. This may be due partly to the fact that Bunuel's savagely ironic vision has, at last, begun to mellow. More probably, however, it is the result of the fact that even Bunuel's wildest hallucinations seem almost pedestrian in the "real" world of the late 70s.

For example, Bunuel has long specialized in perverse eroticism, but, in the contemporary cinema, not even Bunuelian eroticism

the RAIF (Revolutionary Army of the Infant Jesus — an interesting juxtaposition and a reminder of Bunuel's anti-clericalism) is, at least, unusual. Even when terrorists can be kept at bay on the street outside or in the next car, the fabric of bourgeois elegance can be decisively marred by the well-timed intrusion of a mouse or a fly.

Into this context, *Object* places a story based on the novel that was the source of, among other films, von Sternberg's magnificent *The Devil is a Woman*, with Mar-

dancing in a seedy bar.

The key to the film, though, is the male character, Mateo, played by the definitively Bunuelian Fernando Rey. If Dirk Bogarde is the kinky sado-masochist of the European cinema, alike inviting and administering pain in all its forms, Rey is both more kinky and less obvious. While Bogarde's eternally bored look epitomizes modern decadence, Rey's blank expression seems to go beyond even dissipation, achieving a kind of cosmic perversity. There is something so infinitely wicked in his urbane sophistication that he seems to invite retribution (thus he was perfect as the dope dealer in the two *French Connections*).

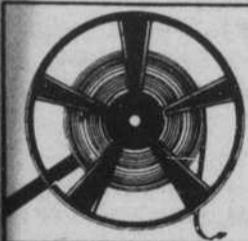
Almost from the beginning of *Object*, long before he has done anything to deserve it, we take positive delight in Rey/Mateo's inability to get the right train reservation; the service he wants does not exist. He is forever the man who, having all he might reasonably want, must ask too much of life, and it delights us when he doesn't get it. The plumpness in his face and the coolness in his manner seem to come from decades of too-easy living. It seems as natural that, in his mid-fifties, he should become obsessed with an eighteen-year-old girl as that she should eternally frustrate his desires.

Since Rey tells much of the story in flashback, it is Conchita's

perversity that dominates the film's surface as her teasing becomes ever more malicious. Only gradually do we become aware of the even-greater perversity of Mateo, of his lechery and the crassness with which he uses money. The woman may seem cold, remote, and malicious but the man asks for everything he gets. In fact, there is something in Rey's performance that suggests that, even if his Mateo were to succeed in making love to Conchita, his obsession would merely change its focus as he came to desire ever-kinkier pleasures.

Bunuel is a master of suggesting more than he states. In the opening sequences, Mateo emerges from and blends into crowds of people, an oblique reminder of the universality of frustrated desire. Similarly, the camera twice momentarily lingers on other young women before Conchita materializes, as if to remind us that Mateo would inevitably find some woman to fill Conchita's role.

For Bunuel, the bandits and terrorists that punctuate the action are part of the uncontrollably random universe that even Mateo and the rest of his class cannot escape. Conchita, appearing first by chance and then as the discreetly-charming confederate of some hold-up men, is the exterminating angel who unleashes chaos on Mateo's rational, secure, ordered world.



By DAVID COURSEN That Obscure Object of Desire

seems particularly perverse. Similarly, his films have often invented surreal devices to torment his complacently bourgeois characters; in *Object*, he implicitly concedes that not even his fertile imagination can conceive of retribution more bizarre or appropriate than international terrorism.

To compensate for diminishing shock value, Bunuel has refined his satirical eye and increasingly come to rely on subtlety and understatement. If terrorists themselves are no longer bizarre, the hi-jacking of a taxi by members of

lene Dietrich in the title role. *Object* was to have starred Maria Schneider, but, as has become her custom, she balked at something or other about the film and had to be replaced. The role of Conchita Perez is now played by two actresses: Carole Bouquet is, to simplify grossly, the Madonna, moving through elegant social settings as she lures the man with her serene, ethereal beauty and her cool, sardonic smile; her counterpart, Angela Molina, the Whore, with flashing eyes and sensuous features promising infinite passion, is more likely to be found

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