

Lukewarm Wax

On Screen

AMERICAN HOT WAX, starring Tim McIntyre, Laraine Newman, Fran Drescher and Jay Leno; written by John Kaye; directed by Floyd Mutrux.

Though it sports more than a little merit as an example of slick exploitation movie-making, the faults of *American Hot Wax* are strong enough to qualify it as a failure for not achieving the higher purpose to which its creators may have aspired.

In fact, one wonders what producer Art Linson, writer John Kaye and director Floyd Mutrux may have had in mind. Certainly Paramount Pictures' advertising department had no idea: *American Hot Wax* is touted as documenting "the beginning of an era," when the story is quite obviously — and equally erroneously — about the end of an era.

The idea, evidently, was to present a brief span in the career of real-life '50s disc jockey Alan Freed (the main character bears his name) who is credited with coining the term "rock and roll" in its musical, rather than strictly sexual, sense. Freed, a top-rated New York air personality, promoted concerts on the side, was an active businessman and a "victim" of the payola scandals of the early 1960s. As a result of the ensuing congressional investigation, Freed lost his job, took a huge financial loss, and suffered emotional crises probably leading to his death in Palm Springs five years later. It's a story with a lot of intrinsic drama, right?

Not enough for this film's creators. Facts are juggled without reason, historical data is ignored, and the resulting film becomes something only slightly more realistic than "Happy Days" — another Paramount production.

The film is filled with what may appear to be authentic details, some of which are, and some of which hint at the production staff's callous disregard for facts. The date is set precisely at Buddy Holly's birthday — September 7, 1959, and the two days following.

Contrary to what *American Hot Wax* implies, Freed's last concert was not in New York City at the Brooklyn Paramount, it was in Miami sometime later.

Straw men are set up. According to this account, Freed was victimized for his insistence on playing black r&b music during a conservative, Ivory Soap-white era. He may have done just that, but it wasn't in New York, and it certainly wasn't in 1959 — Freed committed that particular heresy in Cleveland several years earlier. The payola investigations were largely the result of a war between ASCAP and BMI, the former group feeling that their member songwriters weren't getting enough airplay. The race war, such as it was, was all but long gone. Most of the music played on the soundtrack — the film's strongest asset by far — dates back to the mid-Fifties, when that particular battle was going on.

Which leads to some interesting anachronisms. "Teenage Louise," the Carole King-type played by Laraine Newman, claims to have written two songs — "ABC's of Love" and "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" — that had been hits for Frankie Lymon three years earlier than "Louise" is said to have "written" them. Producer Richard Perry, in a funny cameo, helps a white Danny and the Juniors-type group arrange "Come Go With Me" — exactly as done by



Chuck Berry reelin' and a-rockin' in *American Hot Wax*.

the racially mixed Del-Vikings in 1957. A district attorney cites as evidence against rock and roll Chuck Berry's "filthy" version of "Reelin' and Rockin'" — lyrics that weren't released on a record until 1972! — and Billy Ward's "Sixty Minute Man," an r&b hit in 1951! A songwriter claims to have come up with "Oh, What a Nite," which had in fact been a hit for the Dells, though in 1956. It's hard to take any of this seriously, when the filmmakers themselves show so little regard for accuracy.

All of this is even more puzzling (who, after all, expects facts in musical biographies?) in light of Mutrux's slavish and often quite hip attention to detail in capturing other aspects of the period. The wall of Freed's radio studio is decorated with photos of little-known acts like Ersel Hickey; actors including genuine music-biz figures like singer Eric Mercury and producer Artie Ripp have the period's sleazier elements down to the minutist detail; and the scenes involving young teenager Moosie Drier as a Freed groupie will melt the heart of any kid who has hung around a local station fetching coffee for his d.j. hero, hoping to become involved somehow in the whole glorious hustle. Costuming, language, and the sets are remarkably true-to-life — especially considering that the film was shot entirely in Los Angeles nineteen years after the supposed fact.

The producers' argument in explanation of the conflict between reality and *American Hot Wax* might be that they are striving to retell the "legend." There is, in fact, a semi-prominent disclaimer, saying that none of the characters really existed or bear any resemblance to real-life personalities. So be it, but consider yourself warned. Enjoy the music, which doesn't depend on a period for effect — it's great, no matter what era it begins, ends, or represents. And enjoy

American Hot Wax as entertainment. As history, it's less true to life than exploitation quickies like "Don't Knock the Rock" were, back when it was all really happening.

Todd Everett

STRAIGHT TIME, with Dustin Hoffman, Gary Busey, Harry Dean Stanton and Theresa Russell; directed by Ulu Grosbard.

Dustin Hoffman filed a \$30 million lawsuit against First Artists for allegedly taking *Straight Time* away from him before he could complete his final cut. It's a particularly tricky suit because Hoffman, along with Barbra Streisand, Sidney Poitier, Paul Newman and Steve McQueen, is a principal and co-founder of First Artists. That battle will be decided in the courts, but the movie we see in the theatres cannot be viewed as a mangled classic, a lost film butchered by a greedy producer; I can't see how a different edit would solve the film's fundamental problems of character and motivation.

Quite simply, Hoffman never should have made *Straight Time* in the first place. It's a seedy little film, grim without being insightful. Hoffman plays an all-time loser, just released from his latest eight-year jail sentence. He's a petty crook, without any skills or motivation, and he just can't stay clean. A tough parole officer and a friend on junk are enough to turn Hoffman back to his old games, but we just don't care. We're supposed to see Hoffman as some sort of consummate outsider, enraged by demons he can't articulate. It's a catchy literary notion that often attracts writers, it's even made a good film or two (see Louis Malle's *Thief of Paris* if it's ever revived), but *Straight Time* isn't up to the conceit. The overall response to the movie is apathy — hardly a credible emotion for a two-hour movie.

Hoffman acts with his usual skill, but his character goes from unlikeable in the beginning to hateful in the end. Only Gary Busey as a con on dope and Harry Dean Stanton as a con bored by suburbia have some interior life that makes them interesting. Newcomer Theresa Russell, seen briefly a couple of years ago in *The Last Tycoon*, does okay as the girl who befriends Hoffman, but she's a cliché and remains so to the end.

Save your money.

Jacoba Atlas

THE BIG SLEEP with Robert Mitchum, Sarah Miles, Candy Clark; written and directed by Michael Winner.

Die-hard Raymond Chandler fans are not going to be pleased with this latest remake of *The Big Sleep*. For one thing, it's set in present-day London, a totally bizarre decision (made for tax purposes) that plays havoc with the narrative. Chandler was the ultimate Los Angeles writer, and his vision was tied to that city. Like much vintage wine, Chandler doesn't travel well, and by the time *The Big Sleep* makes it across the ocean to England the sediment has almost muddied the grape beyond recognition.

Writer-director Michael Winner has decided to make sense out of Chandler's convoluted narrative, something that screenwriters Leigh Brackett, William Faulkner and Jules Furthman were unable to do in the 1946 classic. That clarity is now possible because censorship laws have relaxed. Today you can tell a story about heroin, pornography, nymphomania and homosexuality and not have to invent subterfuges which fool some and confuse the rest. So here we have Chandler's unvarnished plot: a millionaire, played by James Stewart, calls in private detective Philip Marlowe to find out who is blackmailing him into paying his youngest daughter's gambling debts. That straightforward request sets off a chain of events that includes several murders, an excursion into the gaudy nightlife of the bored rich, an encounter with petty pornographers and wealthy homosexuals and finally leads to the discovery of insanity right on the old man's doorstep.

Robert Mitchum again plays Marlowe (as he did in *Farewell, My Lovely*) with style and panache. His world-weary eyes and natural elegance neatly complement Chandler's notion of Marlowe as a giant in a universe of midgets. Sarah Miles, on the other hand, flounders as the older sister Charlotte (played in 1946 by Lauren Bacall). She's no longer the love interest, and since she can't compete with her younger sister for amorality, Charlotte has very little to do except stand around wearing pink silk and frizzy hair.

Candy Clark, however, all but chews up the scenery as the nympho-wacky sister Camilla. Her acting is so over-ripe, she fairly drips when she moves. At one point, believe it or not, Candy goes into such a fit she actually foams at the mouth. When was the last time you saw that in a movie! However, both women are slightly marred by the fact that Marlowe is morally repulsed by them. Chandler was the ultimate puritan, but Mitchum is just too sexual a man to make us believe he's as disgusted as he pretends to be.

In the end, what keeps *The Big Sleep* from working is that it has no point of view. Without Chandler's landscape, the movie is nothing more than a detective story. Marlowe needs another dimension the way Dante needed Hell: without that, he's just driving down the same old streets.

J.A.