

# Music-cinema an old marriage

By BILL LINGLE

As soon as movies could talk, they sang. When Al Jolson opened his blackened chops and crooned "Mammy," he began a trend in films that has continued right down to *Saturday Night Fever*.

Every kind of popular music has found its way to Hollywood. In the early days it was the music of vaudeville, Broadway and operetta. In the Thirties and Forties, when folks were more genteel than we are nowadays, even opera had its film counterpart and constituency. When Big Band music became the teen rage in the late Thirties, movies followed suit, and Glenn Miller, the Dorseys and Harry James began film careers, however uncomfortably.

The late Forties and early Fifties belonged to a series of gloriously cinematic MGM musicals — *On the Town*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *An American in Paris*, *The Band Wagon* and, above all *Singin' in the Rain*. They were the peak, indeed the last flowering, of the film musical.

The only other interesting Fifties trend was the musical biography, in which those same awkward dance band leaders who were pop culture heroes a decade ago were lionized by glossy, romanticized film homages. The best of the lot was Anthony Mann's fine *Glenn Miller Story* (1954), which took a few liberties with the facts but faithfully and lovingly recreated the Big Band sound of the Forties.

But the days of both the Big Bands and the big budget film musical were numbered. Rock'n'roll came along, and the rock revolution was as keenly felt at the movies as it was anywhere else in American society.

Fittingly, the first rock'n'roll films were cheap little exploitation numbers that had little value either as music or as film. The only thrills they offered were set pieces featuring such controversial stars as Chuck Berry and Little Richard performing their iconoclastic hits.

The plots and production values were kept so minimal as to be almost non-existent.

Head and shoulders above the rest was Frank Tashlin's vulgar but witty *The Girl Can't Help It*, starring Tom Ewell, Edmund O'Brien and Jayne Mansfield's humongous cleavage. Typically, it tells a thin story about an out-of-work PR man hired to promote the singing career of a gangster's moll. Somewhere enmeshed in this are some remarkable performances by a few of rock'n'roll's greatest stars.

They, and Tashlin's visual approach to comedy, make *The Girl Can't Help It* worth watching when it turns up on the late show.

The real class act of the time was Elvis Presley, but though he nearly always projected a sincere, likable screen persona, his musical films can be charitably described as undistinguished. In fact, his best performance comes in a film in which he doesn't sing to speak of, Don Siegel's *Flaming Star* (1960), though *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) and *King Creole* (1958) have a certain vulgar panache.

The next step in the development of the popular musical film was on most accounts an unfortunate one. Someone had the idea of taking former Mouseketeer Annette Funicello and has-been rock'n'roller Frankie Avalon, plopping them down on a studio-created beach and telling them to sing — something they found rather difficult to do.

The result was a series of "beach party" films, the major function of which today is to remind us how calculatingly naive the pre-Love-In Sixties were.

*Beach Blanket Bingo* was the best of a bad lot, primarily because of the comedic talents of Buster Keaton and Paul Lynde. But the rock'n'roll was as vaporously sterile as the Southern California sun.

What a surprise, then, that in the midst of this aesthetic vacuum should appear the remarkable Beatles and their equally remark-

able first film, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964).

For once director Richard Lester's slapdash, zany visual technique found the perfect subjects, and a new kind of musical film was born. It combined a backstage plotline with a total musical abstraction that freed the songs from the confines of the plot engine. The result was an impressionistic, visually exciting film that told us more about the Beatles than anything before or since, excepting of course their songs themselves.

Little-noticed in the discovery that the Beatles were for real was a film superior to either of the Beatles' efforts (*Help!* was released in 1965), *Having a Wild Weekend*, starring the Dave Clark Five and directed by John Boorman. An interesting essay in the failure of success, this little film never got the bookings it deserved and now is one of the few rock'n'roll films to reach cult status and to garner showings at obscure film festivals.

D.A. Pennebaker's documentary about Bob Dylan, *Don't Look Back*, established a new cinematic approach to rock movies. Following Dylan on his 1965 English tour, Pennebaker forgot the fictional requirements of most musicals up to that time and concentrated solely on the artist as pop god.

The documentary style reached its apotheosis with Seventies *Woodstock*, an Academy-Award winner that drew millions of



The leader of The Band, Robbie Robertson, plays one of his many guitars in "The Last Waltz," opening at the Mayflower June 7.

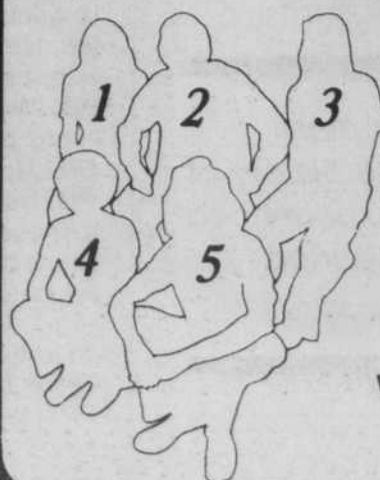
would-be heads who were unfortunately doing something else on The Big Weekend. *Woodstock* remains a fine musical record and a penetrating social document, although it must be admitted that in retrospect we looked more than a little silly.

The same year also brought two films that spelled the end for a certain kind of documentary. *Gimme Shelter*, the Maysles brothers' tacky ripoff of the Altamont Rolling Stones concert, convinced many

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