

A 50's Meteor, in Music and Romance

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

In the raucous, comic "Rashomon" of rock-and-roll titled "Why Do Fools Fall in Love," the brief, meteoric career and busy, turbulent marital life of the singer Frankie Lymon furnish the pretext for a trip through time to the 1950's and 60's, when much of a generation fell under the spell of a new kind of music.

At its best, this uneven but often entertaining movie, written by Tina Andrews and directed by Gregory Nava, whose credits include "Selena" and "El Norte," manages to recapture some of the excitement and turmoil of those days, revel in high spirits and lowdown humor and provide a happy sampler of hits like the title song, as well as "Goody Goody," "ABC's of Love," Little Richard's hit "Tutti Frutti" and the Platters' hit "The Great Pretender."

At its most mediocre, this post-mortem farce, built around a battle for Lymon's estate among three

WHY DO FOOLS FALL IN LOVE

Directed by Gregory Nava; written by Tina Andrews; director of photography, Ed Lachman; edited by Nancy Richardson; music by Stephen James Taylor; production designer, Cary White; produced by Paul Hall and Stephen Nemeth; released by Warner Brothers. Running time: 112 minutes. This film is rated R.

WITH: Halle Berry (Zola), Vivica A. Fox (Elizabeth), Lela Rochon (Emira), Larenz Tate (Frankie), Little Richard (himself), Pamela Reed (Judge) and Paul Mazursky (Morris).

women, each claiming to be his wife and the heir to his royalties, is compounded of courtroom scenes that will leave lawyers gnashing their teeth, shaky acting, ludicrous lines, unconvincing locations and backgrounds and clichéd efforts to evoke nostalgia and achieve psychological depth through grainy montages.

Musically speaking, Frankie Lymon was pretty much of a one-trick pony who was a 13-year-old soprano

A string of lively hits as background music for a life that was short and sad.

from Upper Manhattan at the end of 1955, when his recording of "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" with four neighborhood boys called the Teenagers catapulted them to doo-wop fame.

By the summer of 1957, after four hits, a cross-country tour, recordings for an Alan Freed film and an appearance at the London Palladium, Lymon had parted company with the rest of the quintet. His solo career was a failure. He drifted into despair and picked up a heroin habit. But he seemed to have overcome it when, just before a scheduled recording date in a comeback effort in 1968, he died of an overdose.

The film picks up the story in 1985, a few years after the Diana Ross version of "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" made the song a hit all over again.

According to the film, this brought the major women in Lymon's life out of the woodwork: Halle Berry as Zola Taylor, the glamorous lead singer of the Platters, the supposed first wife; Vivica A. Fox as Elizabeth Waters, a shoplifter who met Lymon after his heyday and said she turned to prostitution to try to help him overcome his drug habit, and Lela Rochon as Emira Eagle, the reserved Southern schoolteacher who married Lymon while he was in the Army, settled with him into a serene domestic life, saw him off on his last fatal trip and buried him. All seem to have a good time with their roles, and Larenz Tate, though far less baby-faced than the original, makes an appealing Lymon.

The indecorous courtroom contest that makes enemies and friends of the three women as their lives with Lymon are depicted in flashback also brings to the stand Little Richard as an irrepressible witness, situates Pamela Reed on the Surrogate's Court bench as the incredulous and incredibly lenient judge and casts Paul Mazursky as the villain of the piece, Morris Levy, the owner of Roulette Records who collected millions in proceeds from the success of Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers.

Lymon's career may have been short and sad, but "Why Do Fools Fall in Love" finds the melodrama of his life in the exciting music of his time and the tumult of his romances.

"Why Do Fools Fall in Love" is rated R (under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It includes appropriately foul language, domestic and drug-related violence and some soft-focus lovemaking.



Nicola Goode/Warner Brothers

Those were the days: Larenz Tate as the 50's teen-age pop star Frankie Lymon in "Why Do Fools Fall in Love," directed by Gregory Nava.