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Palma shows his evil grin, because we are implicated in this murderousness: we want it, just as we wanted to see the bitchy Chris get hers in "Carrie." Cassavetes is an ideal villain (as he was in "Rosemary's Baby")—sullenly indifferent to anything but his own interests. He's so right for Childress that one regrets that there wasn't a real writer around to provide dialogue that would match his gloomy, viscous nastiness. He's been endowed with a Dr. Strangelove dead arm in a black sling (and there's a nice touch: his dead arm hurts), but only his end is worthy of him. This finale—a parody of Antonioni's apocalyptic vision at the close of "Zabriskie Point"—is the greatest finish for any villain ever. One can imagine Welles, Peckinpah, Scorsese, and Spielberg still stunned, bowing to the ground, choking with laughter.

**I**N the early fifties, a Cleveland disc jockey, Alan Freed, built a following of black listeners by playing rhythm-and-blues records produced by small companies for the "race" market; the driving beat and shouting, screaming, raving voices caught on with white teen-agers, too, and his nightly "Moon-dog Rock 'n' Roll Party" became a key element in the youth subculture. Freed is generally credited with having invented the term "rock 'n' roll;" in fact, he successfully filed a copyright on it. In 1954, New York's WINS decided to feature rock, and signed him up. Freed introduced the new mixture of rhythm-and-blues with country-and-Western to thousands of teen-agers in the late fifties, and they flocked to the three films he appeared in and to the live, interracial shows he produced and m.c.'d, which were generally staged in movie palaces. He became the kingpin in the world of selling rock 'n' roll records to teen-agers, and there's another term that he's associated with—"payola." A famous example: when a record of the Chuck Berry song that became known as "Maybellene" was sent to Freed, he arranged to receive twenty-five per cent of the writer's credit; then he played "Maybellene" on the air, and played it and played it. Freed got into trouble with the law in 1958: there was a riot after one of his presentations in Boston—somebody got stabbed and a dozen or so people were assaulted and robbed. He weathered that mess, but in 1960 a House subcommittee looked into corrupt practices in the record industry, and he was indicted for accepting \$30,650 from six companies to play their records; in

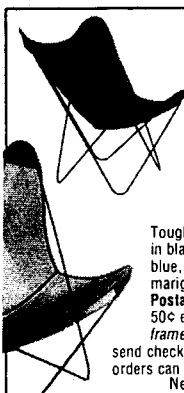
1962, he pleaded guilty and received a six-month sentence, which was suspended. He died in Palm Springs, California, in 1965, at the age of forty-two, of uremia.

Alan Freed (played by Tim McIntire) is the hero of "American Hot Wax"—one of the smartest hustles ever perpetrated on the youth market. Freed is presented as a martyr to the cause of rock 'n' roll. The puritan meanies who don't want kids to have any fun are out to destroy him; these racist bigots particularly don't want to see black and white kids enjoying themselves together, and they'll stop at nothing to get him. The heroic, driven, fearless friend-to-youth Freed is Lenny Bruce with a clean mouth. He's so righteous he's Buford Pusser in the world of pop music; the picture should have been called "Spinning Tall."

The moviemakers—the director, Floyd Mutrux; the producer, Art Linson; the screenwriter, John Kaye—have set about their mythmaking in a singularly clear-eyed manner. In Mutrux's last film, "Aloha, Bobby and Rose" (which he both wrote and directed), Tim McIntire played a generous Texan named Buford, and the suggestions of Pusser here seem calibrated for the rural audience that makes hits of the vigilante movies and the Burt Reynolds chase comedies. In casting McIntire, with his tiny features and puffy cheeks (he could be Jackie Gleason's younger brother), the moviemakers have contrived to turn a Jewish disc jockey who became a New York phenomenon into a good ol' boy. They've covered themselves: there are just enough details in the film—such as Freed's being upset by his father's refusal to accept money from him, Freed's offering to buy a mansion and not worrying about the price, Freed's refusing to sign an affidavit that says he has never accepted money or gifts—so that they could claim they haven't whitewashed him. But, of course, they have: their Alan Freed may live in a society in which disc jockeys are only human, and he may not always be within the law, but in everything that counts he's pure—he never betrays youth or rock 'n' roll.

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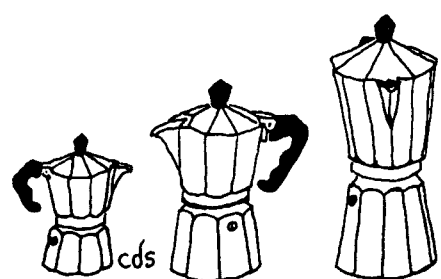


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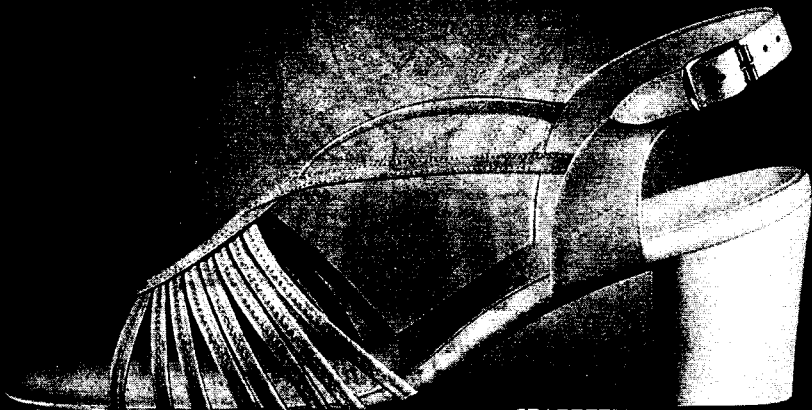
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The moviemakers should have had more trust in the fifties-rock milieu and in their own talents, because everything about the movie *except* this pious morality-tale aspect of it is cheerfully, trashily enjoyable. That includes McIntire's performance. He creates a layered character inside the myth. Freed is weary, omniscient, and slightly uninvolved—a man who sacrifices himself because he doesn't care enough to save himself; he's tinny and self-pitying in the show-biz manner of obnoxious, depressing comedians. What makes "American Hot Wax" so entertaining is the unashamed tackiness of a milieu in which people's minds aren't violated by ideas. The fast-talking lapel grabbers who rush in and out simply want success and fun. (It's what used to be a B-movie milieu.) Mutrux has a feeling for the crass, pop surfaces of things, for the energetic seediness and the too bright smiles of the singers and agents and managers and promo men and assorted hangers-on who clamor for Freed's attention. They surround him at the radio station, at the recording studio; they gang up on him in hallways and outer offices, and they wait for him on the street. The supplicants run the gamut of show-business types; there's even a sisters act, and the younger girl—she looks like an eight-year-old Gilda Radner—is so dead set on stardom she won't stop belting out her music when the audition is over.

Freed's unabashedly shrill secretary, Sheryl (Fran Drescher), is in the middle of the congestion—noisily adding to it. (Jean Harlow might have been her voice teacher.) Sheryl has a blank, open, pretty face with nothing in reserve; she swings her full skirts and proudly explains how she coordinates her clothes for work (she picks them out the night before). Sheryl's happy ordinariness runs along the edges of Freed's maudlin martyrdom, and the edges are the life of the film. Fran Drescher, who played the bit part of Connie in "Saturday Night Fever," was born in 1957 and was first runner-up to Miss New York City Teenager of 1973, when she was fifteen. As Sheryl, she suggests a nasal fifties version of the appealingly vacuous friend-of-the-heroine parts that Lucille Ball used to play in the mid-thirties. But Sheryl isn't contrasted with a middle-class ingenue who speaks in dulcet tones. She's the only love interest in the movie, and Mookie (Jay Leno), Freed's shovel-faced driver, who doesn't know how to court her except by teasing her, keeps her shrieking in outrage; the two of them flirt and bicker constantly—this solves the

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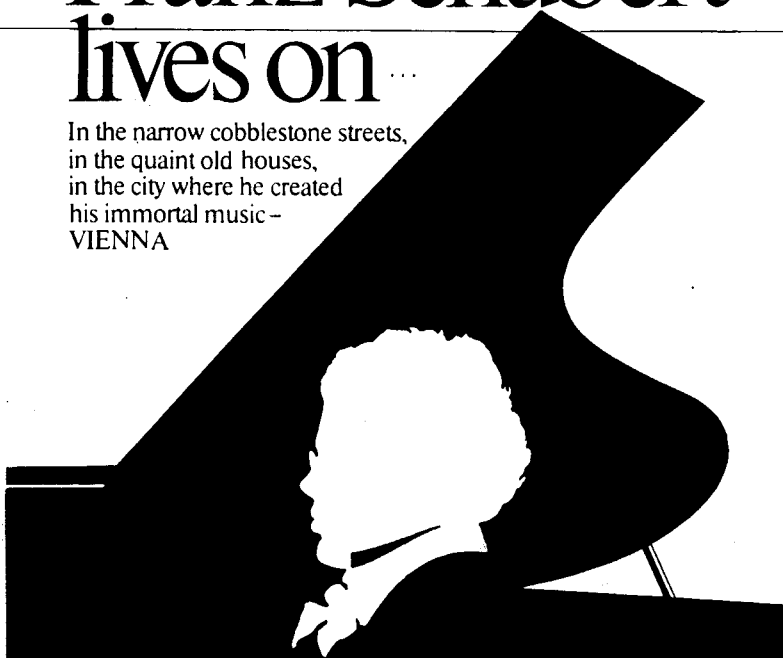
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problem of how to have a love story without conventional romantic scenes. She's all perfect curls, and he's got his slicked-down Presley ducktail. The way Jay Leno plays Mookie, he's like a dogface soldier who's done his basic training in coffeehouse comedy.

The film toys with the conventions of musicals, good-naturedly, half parodistically. The standard earnest young composer who is discovered and set on the path to success is replaced by Lorraine Newman as Teenage Louise, a bobby-soxer composer. Newman's stylized emphatic way of speaking her lines gives them a comic twist, and when Louise teaches a song she's written to four young black men she meets on the sidewalk outside the radio station, and they start to harmonize on her material, the song turns into a spoof of countless "improvised" routines in earlier movies. At other points, such as in dealing with a twelve-year-old boy (Moosie Drier) who's president of the Buddy Holly Fan Club (five thousand members), Mutrux dances on a satirical tightrope. He's helped by John Kaye's dialogue; Kaye (who also did the script of "Rafferty and the Gold Dust Twins") writes a subtle form of verbal slapstick—people having normal conversations sound as if they'd shorted a few circuits.

Mutrux has worked with the same cinematographer, William A. Fraker, on three pictures now, and they must have a good accord, because Fraker does less of his usual lyric blur; the contrasts are sharper, and there's more going on within the frames. Fraker keeps "American Hot Wax" from having the drabness of the old B musicals centering on the world of radio. When Freed is in the outer room of the recording studio listening to a group cutting a record, we see the group through a glass wall, with the responses of Freed and his entourage reflected on it. In the last part of the film, when Freed puts on a big rock 'n' roll show at the Brooklyn Paramount (it was actually shot in L.A. at the Wiltern Theatre, with its signs changed), the backstage activity and the numbers are shot in such high spirits that the intrusion of the story line seems an insult.

Up until the big show, the editing has been fast and snappy, and the short scenes have been just long enough. But during this show, when the music should mount in excitement, the editing style doesn't change, and the great performers are edited into short sequences just like everybody else. Chuck Berry, singing "Reelin' and Rockin'" and doing his duck walk while playing his gui-

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tar, is followed by the raunchy white Louisianian Jerry Lee Lewis punching the piano and singing. The kids in the audience at the Paramount are dancing in the aisles by now—happy interracial dancing, out of fantasyland—and backstage the head villain, the D.A. (John Lehne), is about to close down the show, because in his view Freed is making the kids “behave like animals.” And Freed delivers these saintly lines: “Look, you can close the show. You can stop me. But you never can stop rock ‘n’ roll.” Wearing this jive halo, he rushes into the pandemonium that follows the D.A.’s action, scoops up the little president of the Buddy Holly Fan Club, who is about to be trampled, and carries him to safety. The sham is so obvious that viewers may enjoy the hokiness, but the moviemakers must have gone past what they could stomach; they tossed in an abrupt ending—a few “American Graffiti”-style titles indicating that Freed was taken off the air. They flubbed their heartbreak finish. But it’s a super B movie.

**E**LIZABETH TAYLOR may be generous enough to forgive the director Harold Prince and the cinematographer Arthur Ibbetson for what they’ve done to her—out of the innocence of incompetence—in “A Little Night Music.” But she may not be able to forgive herself for the sad fact that she can’t get by in the role of a famous stage actress—not with her little-girl-with-a-cold-in-her-nose voice and her sloppy carriage. How is “A Little Night Music”? Well, it’s a cut above “Song of Norway” and “The Blue Bird,” but it’s in that general sylvan-settings category. This film is an adaptation of the Broadway show “A Little Night Music” (also directed by Harold Prince), which was a reworking, with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and a book by Hugh Wheeler, of Ingmar Bergman’s fin-de-siècle

love roundelay “Smiles of a Summer Night.” What was lyrical farce in the Bergman film has now become clod-hopping operetta. The attempt at stylization results in pale-pink interiors that look like rooms in a doll’s house, and there’s a dear sweet young girl with a voice that’s a piercing reminder of Julie Andrews.

The camera angles weren’t planned in terms of how the film could be edited, and whoever put the scenes together seems to be yelping in despair. The images jump back and forth, from one humiliated frozen face to another. The actors’ flesh tones recall Marlon Brando’s alternately yellowish and grayish-pink complexion in “A Countess from Hong Kong” (also shot by Arthur Ibbetson). This picture has been made as if Harold Prince had never *seen* a movie. Two of the performers survive: Diana Rigg, because even though her comedy expertise sticks out a little too much in the crawling, dragging scenes, she has great chest tones in her whoops and honks; and Lesley-Anne Down, who is so lusciously, ripely beautiful in her peach-blond wig that her trained, accomplished acting suggests an intelligent form of self-respect. Rigg and Down actually manage to get a performance rhythm going in a few of their scenes. But you know what you’re in for near the beginning when the hero (Len Cariou) is greeted with “Good afternoon, Lawyer Egerman.” Do people really enjoy Stephen Sondheim’s sour sentimentality—songs like “Every Day a Little Death”? The punks are cheerful by comparison.

—PAULINE KAEI

**EDITORS’ NOTE:** Pauline Kael and Penelope Gilliatt alternate as *The New Yorker’s* film critic, in periods of six months each. With this column, Miss Kael concludes her current six-month period. Miss Gilliatt will appear next week.

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Next question.

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