

Michael Harrington
On Saving
The South Bronx

Day-by-Day
Entertainment Guide
To April in New York

Sightless in the City:
One Man's Rage,
Frustration, and Courage

ONE DOLLAR

APRIL 3, 1978

NEW YORK

The Greatest Moments in TV History

Quiz Show Contestant
Charles Van Doren
Answers a Loaded
Question, 1957



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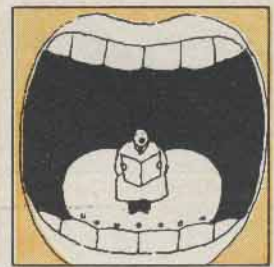
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The South Bronx Shall Rise Again

By Michael Harrington

In 1967, a coalition of governmental and private forces, led by Senator Robert Kennedy, accomplished an urban miracle in "saving" Bedford-Stuyvesant. It could happen again—especially in the South Bronx, which has been a hot issue since President Carter trod its rubbly soil. But it *isn't* happening, and Mr. Harrington asks why, while offering some suggestions.

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Does TV Have a Future? Yes! Will It Be as Good as the Past? No!

Lee Oswald shot . . . Jackie Gleason breaking his leg . . . Nixon's Checkers speech: These were television's great moments. If you've been glued to your set recently, you may have noticed that there aren't any great moments anymore, so we've put together an album of the best from the past. And, as an envoi to the TV that was, Marshall McLuhan discusses how television has disembodied man and transformed him into robot.

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By Jane Weisbord Perin

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By Joey Nash

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has some sight left, he has been moving around the city, trying to see and remember as much as he can. Yet, for reasons germane to the quality of New York life, it has sometimes been an angering and frustrating process.

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The War of the Roses (and Marigolds)

By John J. Tarrant

Every one of the 50 states has its own flower, but the nation has none. Now there is some movement toward establishing a national flower, but what should it be? You'd think the rose would have the inside track, but there's another flower with lots of friends in high places. Thus, as Mr. Tarrant warns, don't count the marigold out.

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By Rinker Buck

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Movies / Molly Haskell

PROFITEER WITH HONOR

“...The Brooklyn of *Hot Wax*, filmed in Hollywood, feels even more real than the location shots of *Saturday Night Fever*...”

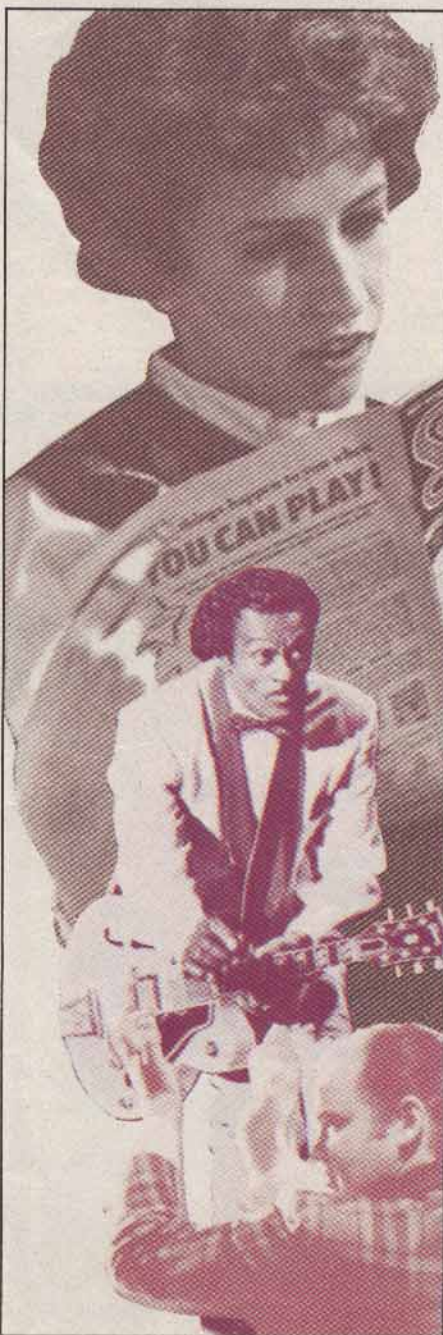
American Hot Wax, an aural magic carpet through fifties rock 'n' roll, is the first of the new cycle of “period” musicals devoted to the antique rumblings of the recent past. As one who was weaned on the car radio in the middle-to-late fifties, I could immerse myself in wall-to-wall Chuck Berry and the Platters and Little Richard and the Drifters and Jerry Lee Lewis and the memories they evoke for at least several more go-arounds, but I don't know how many fellow travelers there are down this particular Memory Lane. I suppose the idea is to enlist the post-disco crowd, in which case there's no reason why *American Hot Wax* shouldn't have a whole new generation of teenyboppers rocking in the aisles.

Although fifties rock 'n' roll came to be upstaged by its better-educated and musically more complex hard and soft and electric variants, it was better than I remembered, though simple enough that when some of the songs are reproduced by new, made-up groups, they sound exactly like the originals. Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis are present in the still-firm flesh, while most of their important r 'n' r contemporaries (excluding Elvis) are represented by their original monaural records on a track that is, in effect, the film . . . though the film is much more than an illustrated sound track.

Director Floyd Mutrux (*Bobby, Aloha and Rose*) and screenwriter John Kaye (*Rafferty and the Gold Dust Twins*) concentrate on one week—the last week—in the career of Alan Freed, the disc jockey from Ohio who became the pied piper of rock 'n' roll (a term he invented) and was indicted—though you'd never know it from the film—for payola. Played by Tim McIntire with the pasty-faced shyness of the radio man, he is the revolutionary whose preference for “spook music” makes him the *bête noire* of first the station head, then the record industry, and finally the law. To local teenagers and would-be musicians, he is a messiah.

The film is at its best in capturing the excitement of a period in which the musical floodgates were opening

wide, and talent was pouring in, or rather up, from the bottom, from blacks and lower-class whites, while teenage listeners, like moths in their tenement cocoons, were suddenly finding their identities, their wings, in the



vibrant music. From the singers who pop in and out of Freed's life, to the kids who manage to get close to him, the supporting cast is wonderful, and in their fierce, entrepreneurial spirit they offer an antidote to the drab Brooklynites of *Saturday Night Fever*.

Laraine Newman, of *Saturday Night Live*, plays a scrawny, would-be songwriter; thirteen-year-old Moosie Drier is uncanny as the president of the Buddy Holly fan club; and as Freed's secretary, Fran Drescher is hilarious, particularly in her ongoing verbal combat with Freed's driver (Jay Leno). A zaftig, expensively dressed brunette, she has that wonderful blend of vulgarity and pseudo-refinement of the teenager who prides herself on being more mature than everybody else.

McIntire gives a beautiful performance, even down to the physical awkwardness of the Anglo-Saxon who hasn't got rhythm but knows it when he hears it. He conveys the sweet generosity of a man who doesn't so much generate electricity as act as its conductor. But in turning the Freed scandal into the Freed legend, the movie overplays its hand. I don't mind the selectiveness of the film's portrait of the fifties, but if I were a stickler for realism, I might object to the notion that rock 'n' roll was invented at the Brooklyn Paramount by Alan Freed. My buddies and I were tooling around to “Mr. Lee” and “Splish Splash” and “Roll Over Beethoven” several years before the Freed scandal, and without interference from the guardians of morality. And, bless our naive souls, we thought it was all happening right where we were, in Virginia or points south and west. But then New York wouldn't be New York if it didn't take credit for every interesting phenomenon developed elsewhere in the country.

It is not liberties like these that I object to—they are the prerogative of the medium that blends fact and fantasy in ways that will always confound the sociological nitpickers and reality experts. (In fact the Brooklyn of *Hot Wax*, filmed in Hollywood, looks like no place on earth, but it *feels* more

real than the shot-on-location Brooklyn of *Saturday Night Fever*.)

What I do object to is that the movie gives us a myth of martyrdom—Alan Freed sacrificed to the forces of repression, Alan Freed dying of a broken heart—and asks us to accept it as documentary fact. By concluding the film with a photograph of the real Freed and a misleading epilogue about his demise—and with a speed that is itself suspect, like a lecturer who rushes offstage before anyone can ask questions—the movie almost forces us to ask questions about its fidelity to fact that need never have been raised.

It's too bad, because *American Hot Wax* is true in spirit to the importance of Freed and his championing of a music that really was subversive. I don't just mean Chuck Berry's wildly lascivious lyrics—which we only dimly "got" at the time—but the ethnic composition of singers producing music that was addressed for the first time to an age group rather than a class group. The rock 'n' rollers were pulling the rug out from under a white-supremacist nation, but without quite realizing it, so that it was a moment of innocence and rare good feelings. The sixties saw the articulation and refinement of these themes in rock and the counterculture, but some of the good feelings were lost.

The critics quoted in the ad for *Fingers* must have seen a different film from the one I saw. My guess is that whatever your response to it, you will neither love it, be angered by it, nor be stunned by it, as the teaser promises. You may be bored into fury (or into *The Fury*, next door) but that's not quite the same. For a film that has prompted the most visceral adjectives in years—"meaty," "hungry," "gutsy," "raw"—*Fingers* is remarkably, deviously uninvolved. Though the finger exercises do occasionally reach the inner intestines, the only hunger is that of writer-director James Toback for the status of moviemaker *maudit*, an ambition as yet unsupported by even modest proficiency in or feeling for the medium.

Like the Dostoevski-spouting gambler of Toback's first screenplay, *The Gambler*, the hero of *Fingers* is another cultural crossbreed and fantasy alter ego. Played by Harvey Keitel, he is the hybrid progeny (but not prodigy) of a gangster dad (Michael Gazzo) and a bluestocking mother (Marian Seldes). Half hit-man, half concert pianist, and wholly obnoxious, he traipses around the city with his tape recorder playing fifties hits at top volume, makes a running play for a sculptor chick,

played with pre-faded beggar-bohemian drab by Tisa Farrow, and plays the piano with self-dramatizing virtuosity that isn't helped by the poorly matched post-synched studio sound recording.

The swaggering, kinky violence of the story's criminal elements produces more queasiness than excitement, particularly as the driving force is a sort of veiled, closet machismo. The fantasies are of the groupie rather than the participant, with Keitel/Jimmy as the stargazer and Jim Brown, who served a similar role in Toback's biography, *Jim*, as the stud icon. There, as here, the athlete and the intellectual shared names and girls, and a jock sanctuary in which the worshiper was at least as fascinated with himself as with the object of his crush.

Gray Lady Down is not, as the title suggests, another horse film, but a better-than-routine disaster film about a submarine that has plummeted to the depths off the coast of Bermuda. Charlton Heston, one of the few remaining old-line authority figures, is well cast as the captain on his last voyage, while his quivering-lower-lipped crew is of a later and less heroic film breed.

David Greene, the English director responsible for some interesting melodramas in the last few years, sticks with confidence to the mechanics of the rescue, a naval operation involving a podlike diving unit, its eccentric inventor-pilot (David Carradine), his faithful assistant (Ned Beatty), and assorted navy personnel (among them Stacy Keach, quite dashing with a mustache).

The benign portrait of the armed services—its efficiency coupled with a grateful acknowledgment at the end—is enough to convince most New Yorkers that they are watching a propaganda film for the B-1 bomber. In a sense, disaster films are all commercials for American technology. Essential to the disaster myth and to our continued confidence in the planes we fly and the hardware to which we entrust our security is the idea that machines are brought to the brink by human error (hamartia). Like the ancient gods, they may not be infallible, but they are not accountable to human beings, to whose greed and folly they bear witness.

In *Gray Lady Down*, Greene develops his story with a fine ambiguity, both in his reticent handling of character conflicts and in some beautifully opaque underwater photography. The film relies for its effects on steadily developing interest rather than the gimcracky, multiple-bio *Ship of Fools* formula, or the bolts and spasms that turn us all into cardiac cases, and leave us feeling more drained than satisfied at the end. ■