

## Arts and Features

## The rise and fall of an American legend

By JOHN BLAND

Assistant Editor

The attitude taken by the filmmakers of "Great Balls of Fire" is to show a portrait of a man who is an immensely talented jerk. Hey, they did it with "Amadeus," why can't they do it with Jerry Lee Lewis?

Because Jerry Lee Lewis is NOT Mozart.

"Great Balls of Fire" is the semi-biographical movie about the early career of the "Killer" (played by Dennis Quaid) and his marriage to his 13-year-old cousin Myra (Winona Ryder).

The reason I say "semi-biographical" is because while it deals with real people, real places and real events, it's often hard to tell if those people, places and events are truthful or colored by the hazy shade of legend.

Director Jim McBride, late of the critically-acclaimed "The Big Easy," has chosen to concentrate on the "legendary" aspects of Lewis' life. He tries to walk the tightrope between the none-too-pleasant facts and the bright light of a man who "shines like gold" when he sits at the keyboards. As a result, a film which could have been a quite powerful study of a man blessed with a great talent instead becomes a high-powered but

self-parodying fable of a jerk.

"Great Balls of Fire" zeroes in on the years when Jerry Lee Lewis looked as if he was going to snatch the rock 'n' roll crown away from Elvis the King: 1956 through '58. For those two frenetic years Jerry Lee rose to become the crown prince of rock 'n' roll only to be brought down by his anarchic behavior off the stage.

Plotwise, the film pops the clutch early and gets the audience into the life of the "Killer" from the word go. Lewis moves to Memphis from the small town of Ferriday, La., and in with his bass-playing cousin and family man J.W. Brown (John Doe, founder of the rock group X). His daughter Myra is fascinated by the man who she first sees banging on a piano in her living room when she returns home from school one afternoon. Flirting unabashedly, her attraction to Lewis is at once sexual and innocent.

When Lewis and Brown hook up a record deal with the Phillips brothers, John (Stephen Tobolowsky) and Sam (the late Trey Wilson), at the legendary Sun Studios, they begin the climb up the pop charts.

"You take one black hand," Sam Phillips tells him, "and one white hand, and whatta you got? You got

rock 'n' roll!"

As Jerry Lee's fame grows, sparked by the success of "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," so does his attraction to Myra. Unfortunately, this is where the film has a bad tendency to slip into self-parody. McBride overdubs cheesy organ music (sort of like a bad '50s soap opera) during Myra's and Jerry Lee's more intimate conversations, thus making them seem trivial.

Inevitably the two elope to Mississippi. When J.W. finds out he goes to Sun Studios with a gun to kill Jerry Lee, but Sam Phillips, himself faced with a public relations disaster, calms him down and hushes up the story.

But the marriage is bound to be discovered sooner or later, and on a tour of England, Myra lets the cat out of the bag to the vicious English press. The public is repulsed, the tour bombs and Jerry Lee is forced to return to the United States, where he insists his fans will understand. Guess what?

The film ends with a defiant gesture, a repudiation of repentance. Whatever Jerry Lee has done, the film says, rock 'n' roll forgives him.

It is odd that of all the fascinating incidents and relationships which have marked Lewis' life, McBride chose to concentrate on only two years. It would have been interesting to see more focus put on Lewis' relationship with his cousin, evangelist Jimmy Swaggart (Alec Baldwin), here represented as a one-dimensional goody-goody who thinks no impure thoughts.

This film does not moralize. Marriage to a 13-year-old cousin is no big deal to Lewis, and his flippant attitude towards this public relations fiasco makes him deserve the damage to his career.

As Lewis, Dennis Quaid struts around like a proud cock-of-the-walk, conceited in every sense of the word and perhaps a bit psychotic. His Jerry Lee is a man whose brains are in his fingers. Like the film itself, Quaid overdoes it most of the time, some-



Dennis Quaid tickles -- no, beats the hell out of -- the ivories

times coming off like Deputy Dawg from Hell, but his energy is right in more intense moments.

Winona Ryder holds the film together as Myra. At turns innocent and touching, flirty and sexy, she gives her role the right mix of bewilderment and straightforwardness that the film lacks. She is definitely a talent to watch.

McBride fills this film with great cameos. Mojo Nixon, in his first dramatic role, plays Jerry Lee's drummer James Van Eaton, and Fabulous Thunderbirds guitarist Jimmie

Vaughn is his guitarist Roland James. Joe Bob Briggs appears for about 30 seconds as DJ Dewey "Daddy-O" Phillips.

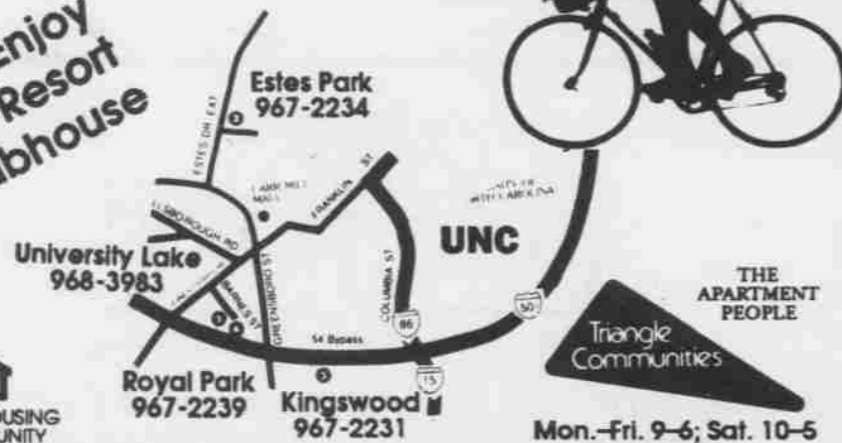
By far the most successful element of "Great Balls of Fire" is the music. McBride has done an excellent job re-recording Jerry Lee's hits, and they sound great in Dolby Stereo. McBride also gets the late '50s look down, from the cars to the clothes to the houses.

But "Great Balls of Fire" is a film with a split personality.

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