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The Sounds of Silence: Songs In Hollywood Films Since the 1960s

When MGM brought out *That's Entertainment* in 1974, the anthology of spectacular musical numbers seemed like Hollywood's own eulogy to the end of an era in which song and film were united. The implicit message of *That's Entertainment*—delivered as much by the old film clips as by Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and the other aging stars who chattily introduced the numbers—was that they don't film songs like they used to. The message was essentially accurate: Hollywood no longer makes the type of film musical that flourished between the 1930s and the 1950s. Indeed, film critics have often lamented the musical's demise, as David Thompson did a few years ago in *Sight and Sound*:

“Whatever happened to the musical?” Is it just that Astaire, Rogers, Kelly, Garland, and Charisse got too old—or too dead—to do it anymore? Did the astonishing age of American songwriting just *lapse*? [...] Did rock and roll crush the musical? Did the genre need the studio system, rich in chorines, arrangers and choreographers? Was it MTV? But if it was MTV (at least a derivative of music), why haven't the movies been capable of fashioning decent musicals since the late 50s? One moment we were getting *Funny Face* (1956), *Silk Stockings* (1957), and *Gigi* (1957)—and then there was nothing. (22)

Crippled by economic difficulties, changing film and music styles, and the loss of the convention that allowed movies to present songs as spontaneous expressions of characters' feelings, contemporary cinema had to develop new conventions in order to incorporate musical entertainment into film narrative.

While in fact the *kind* of musical Thompson describes has died, several films of the past forty years use songs just as imaginatively as did the films evoked by *That's Entertainment*. *Nashville* (1975), *All That Jazz* (1979), *Yentl* (1983), and *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), as well as films we do not ordinarily think of as musicals, such as *The Graduate* (1967) and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1975), have developed new conventions for presenting song in film, conventions that build upon traditions established by the “classical” Hollywood musicals of the studio era. These new conventions, which we will explore, all in some way respond to the demise of the classical Hollywood musical, especially to the loss of the convention that characters could “burst into song” without realistic motivation. In order to understand the relation between recent approaches to presenting song and the history of songs in movies, we must first briefly survey the ways in which

Hollywood initially developed the conventions for incorporating songs into narrative cinema.

Incorporating Song in the Classical Hollywood Musical

The conventions of cinematic realism seemed to preclude the stage practice of spontaneously breaking into song to express one's feelings. In operettas and stage musicals, audiences had come to accept such outbursts as conventional, and applause after a song cushioned the awkward transition back to dialogue. But, in the late 1920s, film had no comparable conventions to rely upon for bridging the separation between singing and "regular" speech. Hence, very early film musicals nearly always concerned professional singers who sang only when they were performing for an on-screen audience, in order to provide a realistic "excuse" for the musical numbers. *The Jazz Singer* (1927) established cinema's "song-as-performance" convention. Al Jolson sings only when he is performing, rehearsing, or, in the case of the song "Blue Skies," demonstrating his talents to his proud mother. His songs, moreover, do not express his emotions or dramatic situation; they are popular tunes—popular even before *The Jazz Singer*—included in the film merely so that Jolson can perform them and not to reveal character or advance the plot. In the years after *The Jazz Singer*, as Richard Barrios details in *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of Musical Films*, Hollywood produced a series of "backstagers," such as the 1929 films *On With the Show* and *Broadway Melody*, in which characters sing and dance as they struggle to put on a show. In most of these early backstagers, the songs' lyrics bear no relation to story, but in 1933 Warner Brothers launched a series of musicals—*42nd Street*, *The Gold Diggers of 1933*, and *Footlight Parade*—in which gritty scripts, jazzy songs by Al Dubin and Harry Warren, and the spectacular choreography of Busby Berkeley all resonate with one another. In *Gold Diggers of 1935*, for example, Ginger Rogers leads chorus girls costumed as huge coins in a performance of "We're in the Money," only to have their rehearsal suddenly interrupted by the police. The sheriff repossesses the lavish costumes and closes the show, putting Ginger, Joan Blondell, and the other girls out of work—and out of the money—during the Depression.

The backstager has proved one of the most resilient conventions in the history of the musical because it permitted songs to be presented as rehearsals, as performances, and as the effusions of professional singers in love with their jobs. It gave us "radio" musicals, such as *The Big Broadcast* series, that allowed audiences of the 1930s and '40s to see their favorite radio stars on the screen. In *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and *A Star Is Born* (1954), the backstager took us behind the cameras to show the genesis of film musicals themselves. To this day, the backstager endures as a vehicle for incorporating songs into such diverse films as *Victor/Victoria* (1982), *The Doors* (1991), and *Moulin Rouge* (2001).

The convention of "spontaneous song"—where a song emerges not as a performance for an on-screen audience but as an impulsive emanation of a

character's feelings—developed much more tentatively. Audiences, filmmakers found, would accept outbursts of song from certain kinds of characters: cartoon characters, children, and especially blacks, who, in such musicals as *Hallelujah!* and *Hearts in Dixie* (both 1929), could sing spontaneously because of cultural stereotypes about their “primitive impulses” and “natural rhythm.” Paramount found that audiences would also accept Europeans, notably Maurice Chevalier, breaking into song and even winking at the camera, signaling to audiences the breach of cinematic realism. In the hands of directors Ernst Lubitsch and Rouben Mamoulian, films such as *Love Parade* (1929), *Monte Carlo* (1930), and *Love Me Tonight* (1932) recreated European operetta, transforming it into modern, sophisticated film musicals.

In 1934, the small, struggling RKO studio took a gamble on a seemingly washed-up stage star, Fred Astaire, casting him and Ginger Rogers in a series of musical films in which American characters smoothly move from talking to singing, walking to dancing, and back again. Films such as *The Gay Divorcee* (1934) and *Top Hat* (1935) are set in foreign locales, where audiences, coming from their experiences with Lubitsch and Mamoulian, had grown accustomed to having characters sing spontaneously. The films always balanced spontaneous musical outbursts with songs portrayed as performances, and Fred and Ginger usually played the roles of performers to help justify their eruptions of song.

A group of highly skilled songwriters—Irving Berlin, the Gershwins, Dorothy Fields and Jerome Kern—wrote songs and surrounding dialogue that deftly eased the transitions between speaking and singing. “Isn't This a Lovely Day?” from *Top Hat* negotiates the transition to song almost seamlessly. Caught in a rainstorm in a London park, Fred and Ginger take refuge under a bandshell, and, as they talk about lightning in increasingly stylized dialogue, a sudden thunderclap brings up background music. As she cowers in his arms, his speech starts to rhyme—“The weather is frightening”—as he eases into the verse (the introductory and more prosaic part of a song). After the verse, which ends with the vernacular phrase “as far as I'm concerned it's a lovely day,” he moves fully from talking into singing. But even in the more lyrical chorus of the song, Astaire still sings with a chattiness bolstered by such colloquial lines as “you were going on your way, now you've got to remain.”

Since Fred and Ginger lip-synched their own pre-recorded voices, their singing seems as effortless as talking, and songwriters took advantage of the “playback” technology to craft more naturalistic lyrics. Instead of the long vowels that singers required in order to project songs from a live stage—“Blue skies smiling at me”—lyricists supplied Astaire and Rogers with clipped words and crisp consonants more natural to the English language in such songs as “Let's Call the Whole Thing Off,” “Cheek to Cheek,” “Stiff Upper Lip,” and “No Strings.” By 1935, the Astaire-Rogers musicals had established the convention that American characters could spontaneously burst into songs—songs that were not portrayed as

performances and that were not pre-existing popular tunes. Instead, songwriters wrote them for the movies in which the numbers appeared, and the songs expressed their characters' emotions at appropriate moments in the drama. For the next twenty-five years, Hollywood produced a series of musical films that rival the best of a Broadway. With such musical dramas as *Pal Joey* (1941), *Lady in the Dark* (1941), and *Oklahoma!* (1943), moreover, it also developed its convention of the "spontaneous song" to make it more expressive of character and dramatic situation—in terms of the quality of the songs and the dexterity with which song integrates with narrative.¹ Audiences throughout this period accepted the convention that not only Gene, Judy, Fred and Ginger, but just about any performer (Jimmy Stewart, Marlon Brando, et al) could give voice to his or her feelings through spontaneous song. That hard-won convention enabled the many successful original Hollywood musicals produced between the 1930s and the 1950s.

In the late fifties, a variety of factors contributed to the loss of that convention, so that nowadays audiences have again grown uncomfortable with the notion that characters can burst into song on screen. Declining attendance, the emergence of television, the rising cost of film production, and the Paramount court case (which compelled studios to divest their ownership of theaters)² created financial troubles for Hollywood studios that forced them to give up the huge production crews of songwriters, choreographers, and orchestras necessary to make original musicals. Richard Fehr and Frederick Vogel, in their book *Lullabies of Hollywood: Movie Music and the Movie Musical, 1915-1992*, note, "Musical pictures, traditionally the most expensive of Hollywood properties, have simply priced themselves out of a market that has grown singularly unappreciative of them to begin with" (255).

FehrVogel cite several other causes besides economic ones for the demise of the classical Hollywood musical. They examine, for example, the ways in which changing film styles quickly robbed the musical of its most valuable conventions. "The principles that had guided filmmaking for decades were displaced by a realism so inimical to musical pictures that they dwindled down to a not-so-precious few. [. . .]The largely harmonious, ever-cheerful movie universe of the period 1929-65 dissolved without a whimper, a victim of the growing disdain for accepting backlot fantasy as a means of evading the depressingly large assortment of social ills demanding real-world remedies" (241-42). Fehr and Vogel point out, moreover, that in the late sixties, when the courts replaced censorship with the film ratings system and removed the restrictions on American cinema's subject matter, "older generations imposed a self-censorship that has estranged them from the box office. Their abstinence has diluted the supply of antiquarians whom old-style movie musicals logically might have been expected to attract" (249).

Three forms of film musicals remained in Hollywood's post-classical period. Studios mounted lavish film versions of such successful Broadway musicals as *My Fair Lady* (1964) and *The Sound of Music* (1965). Apparently, movie audiences

would more readily accept outbursts of song in film versions of popular Broadway shows. Rock musicals offered another form of musical film, including the Elvis Presley vehicles and other musical films aimed at teen-age audiences, such as *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956) and *A Hard Day's Night* (1964). Although the image of rock music as instinctual and uncontrolled allowed for a certain degree of spontaneous musical expression, such films generally relied on the song-as-performance convention in order to integrate musical numbers into their narratives. Finally, Hollywood has continued to release musicals aimed at children: live-action musicals such as *Mary Poppins* (1964), cartoon musicals such as *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), puppet musicals such as *The Muppet Movie* (1979), and stop-motion animation musicals such as *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993). These musical forms left little room for the sophisticated and casually spontaneous songs that had emerged out of the old Hollywood. Such songs had started to sound quaint, ever since mainstream popular music had been given over to rock and other idioms.³ Songwriters who had once flourished in Hollywood found that filmmakers no longer called upon them to write full sets of songs for musicals.⁴ Johnny Mercer, for instance, sank to the piece-work of writing lyrics to the music of Henry Mancini for "theme songs" that played over the opening titles of such films as *The Days of Wine and Roses* (1962) and *Charade* (1964). Without the steady stream of musicals and with changes in song styles and film styles, audiences soon lost touch with the convention of "spontaneous song."

At this point many histories of the movie musical quickly survey the paucity of recent offerings in the genre. Fehr and Vogel title their chapter on the period 1966-1991 "Fadeout," and many of the major scholarly studies of musical film end by bemoaning the demise of the genre. Rick Altman, in *The American Film Musical*, sees the contemporary musical continuing quixotically, "albeit in a reduced and largely unsuccessful manner, [marshaling] its resources in support of the last vestiges of personal and communal creativity in the face of the Walkman and MTV" (366). Jane Feuer, in *The Hollywood Musical*, regards the history of the film musical as "a textbook illustration of a genre's development from a period of experimentation in which the conventions are established (1929-33) to a classical period during which a balance reigns (1933-53) to a period of reflexivity dominated by parody, contestation and even deconstruction of a genre's native tongue" (90). Thus, when she tackles the post-classical musical, she concentrates on films, such as *Pennies from Heaven* (1981), that comment ironically on older musicals. Unlike Altman and Feuer, Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans see a continued vibrancy in the genre, devoting the final chapter of *Blue Skies and Silver Linings* to the contemporary film musical. Although they lament the dearth of scholarship on the period, they do little to offset it, finding themselves "restricted by space to a few general notes on a period which for quality—though not quantity—has been comparable with any in the history of the genre" (224). But such histories overlook numerous filmmakers from the 1960s to the present who,

unable to rely on the convention of spontaneous musical outburst that made earlier musicals possible, invented new means of incorporating songs into their films. These filmmakers, moreover, have rendered songs with as much imagination and dramatic resonance as their predecessors did in the classical era of Hollywood musicals.

“Internal Song” in *The Graduate* and *Yentl*

At almost the very moment the classical era ended, *The Graduate* (1967) helped establish a new technique for bringing song into film. While no one would accept Dustin Hoffman—an actor whose cinematic presence is the furthest imaginable from that of Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly—suddenly breaking into song, his very unsuitability for singing makes him a perfect vehicle for fostering a new convention of song as musical soliloquy. During the film’s opening credits, as we see Hoffman’s Benjamin Braddock standing on an airport’s moving walkway, the soundtrack plays Simon and Garfunkel’s “The Sounds of Silence.” The song does not merely set a tone for the movie. The melancholy mood and lyrics (“Hello darkness, my old friend,” “I turned my collar to the cold and damp”) indicate Benjamin’s loneliness, sadness, and fear, in effect telling us what Benjamin’s expressionless face does not. Indeed, the film invites us to understand that the song, while not sung by Hoffman, expresses his character’s feelings much in the way “spontaneous songs” had in the classical Hollywood musical.” Although “The Sounds of Silence,” which plays at two other points in *The Graduate*, seems to express Ben’s emotions each time it appears, variations in narrative context add nuances to each musical expression. We hear the entire song again during a montage sequence that shows Benjamin alternately lolling around his parents’ home and sleeping in a hotel room with Mrs. Robinson (the wife of Ben’s father’s business partner and a friend of the family). Again, the mood of the song resonates with Benjamin’s dejected manner, but the lyrics we heard during the credit sequence gain new resonance because of the character’s present predicament. Here, the lyrics specifically express Ben’s alienation from his parents, the world around him, and the sex he is having with Mrs. Robinson (“In restless dreams I walked alone, narrowed streets of cobblestone”). Moreover, Benjamin’s inability to tell anyone his feelings about the events in his life, feelings that would revolt his parents, become a subject of the film mostly by means of the soundtrack, revealed obliquely through such lyrics as “But my words like silent raindrops fell, and echoed in the wells of silence.”

Fittingly, the final appearance of “The Sounds of Silence,” during the film’s last moments, is the most subtle and complex. After Benjamin has managed to half-drag, half-lure Mrs. Robinson’s daughter, Elaine, from her wedding to a medical student, the two of them escape the crowd at the wedding chapel and triumphantly leap aboard a public bus. Although critics have remarked on the movie’s depiction of Ben and Elaine’s increasingly worried expressions, as the reality of their actions

seems to settle into their faces, none of the scholarship we have seen acknowledges the contribution of the Simon and Garfunkel song that starts to play over the soundtrack the moment their expressions turn from jubilation to anxiety. The melancholy song, already linked to Ben's sadness, loneliness, and indecision, works in tandem with the image to help undermine the otherwise happy ending.

Although three other Simon and Garfunkel songs appear in *The Graduate*, none of them suits its context as neatly as does "The Sounds of Silence." The most non-expressive and thematically incongruous song is, ironically, the only one written directly for the movie. The song "Mrs. Robinson" clearly comes from a perspective other than Benjamin's—more like the perspective of an omniscient author—and, even though it alludes directly to a character in the film, the lyrics bear no evident relation to the story ("And here's to you, Mrs. Robinson, Jesus loves you more than you will know"), as though Simon and Garfunkel knew little about *The Graduate* except that one of the characters was named "Mrs. Robinson."

The film's two other songs pertain more directly to their dramatic contexts. "April Come She Will" also appears during the montage sequence that depicts Ben sleeping with Mrs. Robinson, playing immediately after "The Sounds of Silence" and extending the first song's melancholy tone. While the song's lyrics do not seem quite so thematically relevant as those of the earlier song, such lines as "May, she will stay, resting in my arms again" perhaps provide an ironic contrast to the anti-romantic affair, and "A love once new has now grown old" coincides with Ben's evident boredom with Mrs. Robinson, as he blankly watches television while she dresses and leaves their hotel suite. "Scarborough Fair/Canticle" occurs during another montage sequence, playing over scenes of Braddock pursuing Elaine Robinson as she moves back to Berkeley. Simon and Garfunkel's melancholy rendition of the English folk song obliquely expresses Benjamin's mournful longing for his sweetheart ("Remember me to one who lives there"). For instance, the lyric "Then she'll be a true love of mine" plays as the film depicts a dispirited Ben, sitting at a desk in front of a piece of paper on which he has repeatedly written Elaine's name.

The convention of "internal song" employed by *The Graduate* might have gone unnoticed by the film's first audiences since it resembles the earlier convention of "spontaneous song." In both conventions, song is used to express the psychological interiority of a character. Like the songs of classical-era musicals, moreover, the Simon and Garfunkel score helps to establish a connection between a character and the films spectators, giving them privileged access to the character's thoughts by means of song. Just as "You Were Meant for Me" expresses Gene Kelly's feelings for Debbie Reynolds in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), telling her what he cannot say in regular speech, here the songs represent the character's emotions more fully than his dialogue does. But unlike Kelly's expression of feeling, Hoffman's "outburst" is by nature contained. Indeed the actor's very taciturn performance allows for the musical intrusion: The lyric says

what Benjamin cannot say to the adults who badger him, to his parents, or even to himself. Since Hoffman, in every sense of the phrase, “can’t sing,” song becomes an interior monologue, a musical soliloquy that his character would sing if only he could. Such “internal” or “silent” songs suit Method actors, such as Hoffman, since their performances are often distinguished by failures of speech, their characters’ deepest emotions revealed through a rhetoric of pauses, stutters, and lines unsaid. The convention of “internal song,” then, gives audiences another means of indirect access to the characters’ thoughts. In that way, such songs oppose the tradition of songs in movie musicals, signifying not the relief that comes through musical expression but rather the frustration of a character with inadequate means or occasions to express himself.

Such interior outbursts of song in non-musical films, from performers and characters who seem the furthest cry from those we expect in Hollywood musicals, greatly open up the possibilities for songs in cinema. In *Easy Rider* (1969), Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper can, in effect, “sing” Steppenwolf’s “Born To Be Wild” as they drive their motorcycles across America’s highways. Bud Cort expresses his personal and spiritual awakening through the songs of Cat Stevens in *Harold and Maude* (1971). Slim Pickens, as a mortally wounded cowboy, “sings” “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” with Bob Dylan’s voice in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973).

Songwriters often composed “internal songs” directly for the films in which the songs appeared; hence audiences would not register them as pre-existent popular songs (though many became popular) but rather imagine them emanating for the first time from a befitting moment in the movie. Riding the Greyhound to New York, John Voight in *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) expresses himself inwardly, as he cannot do outwardly, with “Everybody’s Talkin’.” Paul Newman voices his feelings through “Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head,” as he pedals the newfangled velocipede to the amusement of Kathryn Ross in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969)—“because I’m free, nothing’s worrying me.” The fact that performers B. J. Thomas (for “Raindrops”) and Harry Nilsson (for “Everybody’s Talkin’”) were unfamiliar to audiences contributed to the illusion that the songs emanated from the characters’ thoughts. In *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968), an even more unimaginable singer, Steve McQueen, is given voice while flying his glider. Taking the visual image of the glider’s circling turns and connecting it with McQueen’s feverishly spinning imagination, lyricists Marilyn and Alan Bergman put words to a portion of Michel Legrand’s sound track, concocting “The Windmills of Your Mind,” a song that comes close to making McQueen’s character sing.

Fifteen years later, the Bergmans took the convention of “internal song” a step further in the musical *Yentl* (1983). There, a believably singing actress, Barbra Streisand, gives voice to Yentl’s inner quandaries through internal musical monologues. In her first song, alone in her parlor, Yentl sings openly about her longing for knowledge, but, when she enters her sleeping father’s bedroom, her lips

stop moving and the song becomes internal, since she cannot voice such unwomanly ambitions in his presence. This pattern continues throughout the song. When she leaves her father's room for the kitchen, she again sings openly. Then the internal monologue continues when she attends synagogue the next day, and we hear her voice pouring over the singing of the men as she sits, visibly silent, among the women in the back of the room.

After her father's death, Yentl cuts her hair, dons male clothing, and becomes a rabbinical student. Disguised as a male, she only expresses herself, while in the presence of others, through internal, silent songs. The internal song is often poignant, as when she finds herself falling in love with her yeshiva classmate, Mandy Patinkin (who, despite his magnificent Broadway voice, never sings in the film, openly or silently), and expresses to herself and to us what she cannot say to him. The convention of internal song allows for Yentl's ironic commentary on the action and also functions like a theatrical aside, as when, singing "No Wonder He Loves Her" while the women of the house fawn over the men at dinner, she realizes the advantages of being a man.

By shifting from open singing when Yentl is alone to "internal song" in the presence of others—alternating from traditional spontaneous song to the newer convention of internal musical monologue—the Bergmans capture not only the predicament of Yentl but of all "silent" women. At the very end of the film, when, having shed her disguise, she sails to America as a woman in quest of knowledge, Yentl moves from open singing when she is alone in the back of the ship, to internal song as she moves forward among the other passengers, and then, at the song's climax, when she says "Papa, I have a voice now," she sings openly in the presence of others for the first time in the movie. At first, the other passengers gaze in wonder at her musical outburst, but then, as if acknowledging the naturalness of Yentl's transformation, they accept it as serenely as do extras in old musicals.

The Semiotics of Style and Performance in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* and *Nashville*

The use of songs as internal monologues was just about the closest post-1960 Hollywood films could come to reclaiming the convention that characters could break into song without realistic motivation, but the older song-as-performance convention, in which characters perform songs for on-screen audiences, continued. With the past century of songs as their palette, however, recent filmmakers have exploited not only the diversity of lyrics but also the semiotic values of the musical styles themselves, mixing standards, rock, folk, jazz, and country songs together in the same film.

Martin Scorsese's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1975) combines song styles in ways that express both the passage of time and the maturation of the film's protagonist.⁵ In the opening scenes, we see Alice, as a child, set against a background reminiscent of the early scenes of *The Wizard of Oz*. She sings along

to a syrupy version of “You’ll Never Know,” a sentimental song by Mack Gordon and Harry Warren so popular that it appeared in three films in three consecutive years—*Hello, Frisco, Hello* (1943), *Four Jills and a Jeep* (1944), and *Diamond Horseshoe* (1945). It is remembered now, if at all, as a period-piece. Instead of displaying the romantic charm we expect from a child in an early musical, however, little Alice cannot quite carry the tune that Alice Faye sings over the soundtrack. Moreover, she curses and pouts as she expresses her determination to become a singer. The next tune we hear, “All the Way from Memphis”—a loud rock song that shakes us jarringly from the ethereal *mise-en-scene* of Alice’s childhood to the harder present-day setting—blares from the stereo of grown-up Alice’s teenage son as he lies on the floor between two speakers. The juxtaposition of song styles echoes the quick shift in scene and underscores the passage of time elided by the film.

When Alice’s husband dies in an accident and she tries to work as the singer she always wanted to become, we see her painfully practicing “Where or When,” a song from *Babes in Arms* (a 1938 Broadway musical that became a 1939 Hollywood film). As she struggles through the Rodgers and Hart song, she expresses both pride and humility over her singing. The song’s sophisticated lyrics, its nuances of emotion, its wide-ranging melody, and Alice’s earnest performance reflect the mature depth she has reached since she sang “You’ll Never Know” as a child. One could hardly find any resonance between the lyrics of the songs in the film and Alice’s feelings (“You’ll Never Know” does not express Alice’s longing for a lover, merely her longing to be a singer). But the styles of the songs are expressive, and their relative superficiality or depth marks the character’s maturation.⁶

Robert Altman’s *Nashville* (1975), using a rich mixture of song styles, combines country, rock, gospel, anthems, and folk ballads. But *Nashville*’s musical complexity results not only from its diversity of musical styles but also from the quality and variety of the vocal performances. At times the styles of song and performance plainly define the film’s characters, such as when Sueleen Gay’s (Gwen Welles) poor singing voice indicates the foolishness of her dream to become a famous country singer. Similarly, the songs and performances of Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson) help to characterize him as phony and pompous. At the beginning of the movie, for instance, Hamilton sings a patriotic song about America called “200 Years,” a stiff and sweaty number that sounds as though it is trying hard to be sanguine. (The song’s refrain, “We must be doin’ somethin’ right to last two-hundred years,” sounds like the film’s mock-paeon to America’s bicentennial, inviting us to consider the considerably longer lineages of most other countries.) While some viewers might find it difficult, at first, to tell whether the movie is commending Hamilton or mocking him, when he cuts off the performance and sternly bawls out one of the long-haired musicians—whom, in a most

undemocratic elitism, he won't even address directly—the movie establishes the character as manifestly arrogant and hypocritical.

At other times, however, *Nashville* uses song style and performance style in ways that undermine our opinion of a character, hence complicating an established characterization. When the film introduces the country singer Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakley) at the Nashville airport, she comes across as juvenile and superficial, insipidly praising the performance of a high-school band (“I think you kids get better every year”) and collapsing into the arms of her manager in what looks like a pathetic plea for sympathy and attention. But when we finally hear her sing, and she reveals herself as the one truly exceptional talent in the movie, the sincerity of her performances and her depth of emotion onstage provide a counterpoint to her otherwise flighty behavior.

The movie also uses song and performance styles to complicate the characterization of Tom Frank (Keith Carradine), the rudest member of a rock trio depicted in the film. Capitalizing on the image of male rock artists as womanizers, the film establishes Tom as a Casanova, careless of others' feelings, using women solely for sex and temporary companionship. In a strangely affecting scene at a nightclub, however, Tom dedicates his song “I'm Easy” to Linnea Reese, an unsatisfied wife played by Lily Tomlin, whom he succeeds in landing in bed. The moment would seem more slimy if the ballad itself were not so beautiful, as seductive to the movie's spectators as it is to Reese—whom he has singled out as special, just as we have—and if his performance did not appear genuinely affectionate toward her. Although the song's refrain (“I'm easy”) and some of its other lyrics accord with his carefree ways and sexual promiscuity, its romantic style and Tom's heartfelt performance instill us with some feeling for a character who had, until this time, seemed mostly callous and vain.

The styles of song and performance contradict and enrich not only our impressions of the characters in *Nashville* but also the ideology in it that at times appears so complicated as to be practically incoherent. The performance of the film's final number, “It Don't Worry Me,” emblemizes *Nashville*'s musical and ideological complexity. “It Don't Worry Me”—which comes at a political rally at the city's “Parthenon,” just after a mad gunman shoots Barbara Jean—is written and performed in the style of a protest song but is in fact just the opposite. A fragile and innocent character named Albuquerque (Barbara Harris), whom we have never heard sing and who has been trying to break into the country music business since the start of the movie, has finally gotten her break. In the ruckus after the shooting, Haven Hamilton unwittingly hands her a microphone, and, though she begins singing tentatively, she resounds finally with a huge and charismatic voice that encourages not only the gospel singers to join with her but the entire audience at the rally. Shots of the singing crowd are reminiscent of *Woodstock*. The song's style sounds so catchy and anthem-like and Albuquerque's triumphant performance seems so uplifting that movie audiences sometimes sing the song as

they leave the theater. It may take them the time to get to their cars before they consider the shooting that instigated the song and before they think about the lyrics they are, in fact, singing: “You may say that I ain’t free, but it don’t worry me.”

“Dark” Musicals and the Exposure of Artifice

One would not consider most of the movies we have discussed musicals *per se* but rather dramatic pictures that incorporate song to reveal character. But, starting in the 1970s, Hollywood also began generating new forms of the full-fledged musical that accorded with contemporary film styles. We want now to look at some of these new musicals and at how filmmakers got away with making them despite the genre’s purported demise. In particular, we want to look at the “dark” musicals of the 1970s and at the ways they exploit the musical genre’s reputation for felicity and escapism.

The seventies might seem a peculiar time for movie musicals because whereas the period is usually characterized by such depressing and gritty films as *The French Connection*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, and *Taxi Driver*, we distinguish the traditional musical largely by its fancy and exaggerated cheeriness. But there has always been a dark underside to the genre. From Warner Brothers’ Depression-era musicals through 1954’s *A Star Is Born*, the musical has often incorporated moments of seriousness, cynicism, and pessimism. In Warner’s *Footlight Parade* (1935), for example, James Cagney plays a down-and-out producer who mounts brief but spectacular musical numbers as “filler” between vaudeville acts. As he frenetically packs up and moves his elaborate sets and costumes from theater to theater, his economic desperation contrasts to the carefree, opulent, escapist numbers he stages. This downbeat strain in the musical genre expanded in the seventies, a decade that produced such dark musicals as *New York, New York* (1977), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), and *The Rose* (1979). Discussing the post-classical Hollywood musical, Babington and Evans write, “What we see is the encounter between a utopian urge (without which the musical, as we know it, would be unrecognizable) and a dystopian reality given prominence, even predominance, in a way that it never was before” (225-26). We can witness this conflict, for example, in Bob Fosse’s 1972 film adaptation of the stage show *Cabaret*. A musical about Nazism in Germany, its premise for a musical is so outrageous that it had already been parodied in Mel Brooks’s film *The Producers* (1967). Likewise, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) counts as one of Hollywood’s darker musicals, certainly as the darkest musical ever made for children. As Gene Wilder sings, “If you want to view paradise, simply look around and view it,” the optimistic lyric runs contrary to Wilder’s melancholic delivery and the images of bratty children greedily slurping chocolate and candy.

In a strange way, the musical genre suited seventies filmmaking. For one thing, the 1970s fell close enough to the musical’s prime that audiences understood when movies of this period “quoted” classic musicals. Seventies filmmakers,

moreover, exploiting the datedness of the genre, found musicals a convenient tool for both criticizing cinema's artifice and underscoring their films' harsh realism. We have already seen how *Nashville* (1975) employs songs (such as "200 Years" and "I'm Easy") that directly or obliquely suggest the deceitfulness of the characters singing them. Other films of the seventies also correlate singing with deception, sometimes linking musical performance with the artifice of cinema itself. Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York* (1977) contains a sequence (severely cut, because of time constraints, for the film's initial release but included intact in the video release) that shows Liza Minnelli starring in a 1940s Hollywood musical, appropriately titled *Happy Endings*. The main character of the film within the film becomes a singing Broadway star who eventually marries her true love. The artificiality of the forties musical juxtaposes the depressing realism of the larger story in which the characters fail to come together. Brian de Palma's horror-musical *Phantom of the Paradise* (1974) also associates musical performance with artifice: the stage shows depicted in the film come across as glitzy, bastardized pop versions of the heart-felt musical compositions of the film's central character, Winslow Leach. Whereas many earlier musicals (such as *Meet Me in St. Louis* [1944] and *An American in Paris* [1951]), represent songs as spontaneous outbursts of authentic feeling, seventies movies often portray musical performance as a transparent sham.

For a generation of American filmmakers fascinated with calling attention to the artifice of cinema their predecessors had tried hard to mask, the musical's struggles with the technique of breaking into song became in the seventies an occasion for film commentary. Rather than trying to conceal the artifice, seventies filmmakers called conspicuous attention to it. *All That Jazz* (1979) represents, through hallucinations, the death-bed scene of its main character, Joe Gideon (Bob Fosse's fictitious, semi-autobiographical filmmaker and Broadway choreographer). In a setting that looks like a surreal mixture of hospital room and Hollywood sound stage, Gideon imagines that his family and friends talk to him through a series of musical performances. When Gideon's family and a cast of dancing chorus girls break into the 1923 song "Who's Sorry Now?"—performed in the fanciful style of a Busby Berkeley number—the film associates Gideon's fantasy with the fantasy of the musical genre. The death-bed scene merely supplies the last and most outrageous example of the film's tendency to correlate fantasy with outbursts of song. Earlier in the film, for instance, after Gideon's heart attack, his ex-wife tries to cheer up the anxious cast, reassuring them of his good spirits and quick recovery and then performing a gay musical number. During the song, in shots that belie the optimism of the song-and-dance, the film intersperses flashbacks in which she weeps for Gideon at his hospital bed, an oxygen-mask covering his comatose face.

The 1976 original film musical *Bugsy Malone* also associates musical outbursts with artifice. The film, which has a cast of children playing the parts of

gangsters, calls attention to the lip-synching, rather than trying to conceal it as earlier musicals had done. The child actors speak in their own voices, but, when they open their mouths to sing, we hear the deep, mature voices of adult singers, voices that contrast conspicuously with the images and sounds of the children. The effect is jarring and the kids look somewhat ridiculous as they impersonate gangsters and lip-synch the voices of grown-ups, but it all seems somehow appropriate for a revisionist gangster movie, since the genre often portrayed characters who posture and perform. The film also plays on our impression that old gangster films now seem quaintly contrived. Hence, when the characters break into song, the film associates musical outburst with the artifice of film itself.

Revisiting the Classical Hollywood Musical: *Everyone Says I Love You* and Convention for Its Own Sake

Woody Allen has demonstrated that he has the sensibility and experience to redefine how cinema uses song and to bridge the gap between the classical Hollywood musical and more recent film styles. Songs from the period of Hollywood's studio era figure prominently in many of his films ("Seems Like Old Times" and "It Had to be You" in *Annie Hall* [1977], songs of Cole Porter and Hoagy Carmichael in *Stardust Memories* [1980], and an array of popular ballads and jazz tunes from the 1930s and early 1940s in *Radio Days* [1987]). Allen's rootedness in New York—in the era of the Gershwins, Porter, and the hey-day of the film musical—makes him a logical figure to link the conventions of contemporary film to those of classical Hollywood musical. His 1996 film, *Everyone Says I Love You*, is an innovative contemporary musical that succeeds in quoting the old Hollywood musical while only slightly mocking it.

Like *When Harry Met Sally* (1989)—whose score contains such classics as "Love is Here to Stay," "Let's Call The Whole Thing Off," and "It Had To Be You"—*Everyone Says I Love You* incorporates old love songs, but Allen's actors do their own singing and the songs are not all familiar standards. The film opens with Edward Norton singing "Just You, Just Me," a song from the 1929 film musical *Marianne*. By choosing an almost-forgotten song, Allen can call up the era of the old musical while still suggesting that the song emerges spontaneously from Norton's character. Alan Alda, at one point, sits at a piano and, as a birthday offering, sings Cole Porter's "Looking At You" to his wife. By choosing a less familiar song by a well known songwriter, Allen allows Alda to "own" the song more than he would had Alda followed Fred Astaire singing "Night and Day." Moreover, Porter's sophisticated but unpretentious lyrics and Alda's casual delivery bespeak his deep and comfortable love for his wife, whom he offhandedly compares to Helen of Troy. David Thompson considers Allen's musical a mere "wistful glancing back at a form that is no more" (20), and the film does, as Thompson writes, pay "due reverence to a lost past" (23). But the film is not merely nostalgic nor does it simply mimic the musicals it honors. Rather, unlike any of the

other musicals we have looked at in this essay, *Everyone Says I Love You* takes pleasure in the contrived conventions of the musical genre without ironically commenting on them or making itself superior to them.

Aside from introducing performance-based songs into the film, such as “Looking at You,” Allen makes little effort to motivate his characters’ singing realistically or to smooth over the awkward transitions into or out of song and dance. On the contrary, he seems intent upon showing the seams that join songs to “regular” narrative, seams that, in this movie, look peculiarly uneven. Indeed, even though *Everyone Says I Love You*’s audiences must have known they were going to see a musical, when Norton bursts into song in the film’s opening seconds, it’s practically the last thing we might have expected. The awkwardness and conspicuousness of the artifice are enhanced by the fact that, although he used name actors, they do not have strong singing voices. Some of the actors, such as Alda and Goldie Hawn, sing well (although Allen apparently told Hawn not to sing as professionally as she could). Others, such as Edward Norton and Julia Roberts, sound no better than one’s cousin at a holiday party and probably worse. Despite the amateurishness of some of the performances, they usually sound delightful. When Allen himself sings the 1924 song “I’m Thru With Love,” his poor singing voice makes him appear more dejected and the song more poignant for its lack of polish and professionalism. The experience of watching these actors struggle through the songs differs from that of watching, say, Jimmy Stewart singing “Easy to Love” in *Born to Dance* (1936) or Marlon Brando singing “Luck Be A Lady” in *Guys and Dolls* (1955). Those films seem to be making do with their actors’ voices; they would have been better films if the actors could sing better. *Everyone Says I Love You* seems blind to musical ability. Instead, it relishes that, although it may seem strange to us now, film has a tradition of spontaneous musical outbursts and need not apologize for it.

Unlike his classical-era predecessors, Allen seems more concerned with the pleasure of the musical’s tropes than with the talent displayed in the performances. Studio-era filmmakers could always justify musical outbursts because the songs allowed for the spectacle of musical entertainment. The extravagant contrivances they developed to integrate songs into film were chiefly motivated by audiences’ desire to see Fred, Gene, Judy, and all the other talented performers sing and dance on screen. We accepted the convention that characters could break into song, despite its evident absurdity, for the privilege of watching supremely gifted performers do what they did best. Allen’s film rejects motivation for the convention, and takes delight in the convention itself. The movie demonstrates what fun we could have if, as in a movie musical, people burst into song from time to time to express their feelings.

Although unlike any musical that preceded it, *Everyone Says I Love You* is one logical derivative of the history of movie musicals and of the conventions for presenting songs in film that we have traced in this essay. We have seen the ways

in which classical-era filmmakers attempted to mask the convention of “spontaneous song” by surreptitiously easing the transition from regular speech into musical performance. We have also seen how, in the post-classical period, movies adopted conventions of “internal song” and “song as performance” to incorporate songs and yet to avoid unrealistic musical outbursts, and how the artifice-exposing films of the seventies commented on the absurdity of the genre’s conventions. Although *Everyone Says I Love You*, like most musical films since the 1960s, responds to the convention of “spontaneous song,” Allen’s film does not view the convention as a burden that must be tolerated, dodged, mocked, or explained. Rather, for him, the convention itself accounts for at least some of the genre’s particular pleasure. Combining contemporary styles of film and performance with the musical’s most outdated tropes, *Everyone Says I Love You* shows us what our world would look like if it obeyed the absurd conventions of a classical Hollywood musical.

Notes

¹ Rick Altman points out that some of the innovations in the Broadway production of *Oklahoma!* were in fact developed by director Rouben Mamoulian for his 1937 film musical, *High, Wide and Handsome* (Altman, “The Musical” 300).

² In 1938, the U.S. Justice Department initiated *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc. et al*, alleging that Paramount, Warner Bros., Loew’s (MGM), Twentieth Century-Fox, RKO, Universal, Columbia, and United Artists colluded “to monopolize the film business.” The Paramount Decision, finally handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1948, “declared that the eight companies had been guilty of monopolistic practices” and ordered the studios “to divest themselves of their theater chains,” if they owned them, and “directed the eight Hollywood firms to end [. . .] practices which hampered independent exhibitors” (Thompson and Bordwell 374-75).

³ Fehr and Vogel write, “As rock music displaced escapist ballads on radio and records, Hollywood producers recognized the imperative of giving it a prominent role in their repackaged musicals or dispensing with the genre altogether” (242).

⁴ Explaining the abrupt departure of studio songwriters in the 1960s, Gary Marmorstein writes in *Hollywood Rhapsody: Movie Music and Its Makers 1900 to 1975*, “The cocoon-like atmosphere of the studio music departments—administrative protection provided by former or working musicians who ran interference with the front office—collapsed during this period, following the 1958 musician’s strike. Younger composers and orchestrators went freelance. Younger songwriters, trying not to depend on movie work, aligned themselves with recording artists or went into television” (402).

⁵ The score of Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* uses a variety of song styles to indicate period, character growth, and mood. *Goodfellas* contains forty-two popular songs

from the various eras depicted in the movie, songs that effectively trace the development of popular music in the United States from the late 1950s to the early 1980s. In the movie's first song, for instance, Tony Bennett sings "Rags to Riches" as the film depicts Henry Hill's childhood in New York and his efforts to become a gangster. The song reflects Henry's romantic longing for glamour and fortune. The movie closes with Sid Vicious's punk rendition of the Frank Sinatra standard "My Way," after Hill has been forced to abandon his life of crime and enter the government's Witness Protection Program. Sid Vicious's destructive delivery, which seems to mock Sinatra's earnest performances from prior decades, accords with Henry's nihilistic attitude toward his current life as an "average nobody."

⁶ Victoria Johnson sees a similar semiotics of musical styles in the score of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989). She points out that various musical strains become associated with individual characters, ideas, and emotions in the film. For instance, analyzing some of the film's instrumental music, she writes, "While the stringy folk inflections complement the sense of history and togetherness felt by the residents of the block and suggest the time-tested wisdom of Mother sister and Da Mayor's generation [. . .] the jazz strains, often associated with Mookie and Sal, suggest active, contemporary, struggling, and unresolved voices in the polyphonic work" (22). Both the folk and jazz styles, she argues, contrast with the rap music in the film that emphasizes words rather than melody and that "drowns out any competing dialogue" (214).

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