

# REVIEW

## *HER SMELL - A LOOK BACK*

Joshua Adams, State University of New York

Movies about rock and roll aren't really a novel idea, yet few would be considered classic cinema. Concert films and documentaries aside, which ones sit at the top? Richard Lester's comedic *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), George Cukor's *A Star is Born* (1954), I know it's sans rock and roll, but it's a celebrated and reverberating film about music and fame. If you asked me, perhaps the 2007 film, *Control*, or Alan Parker's visual strumming on *Pink Floyd - The Wall*, maybe the Cameron Crow rockstar mashup/biopic, *Almost Famous* (2000). What is the focus? Is it about the band, or is the music just a backdrop to another story, altogether? It's not enough that rock stars live this "rock star life," as fans, we go decades sustaining ourselves on food, water, and envy. This got me thinking --- never a good idea, but lately, many of the films about musicians lean toward country and western, or rock and roll of the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century. Documentar has been about the only cinematic outlet for rock and roll in recent years including Edgar Wright's brilliant *Sparks Brothers*, Alex Winter's *Zappa* (2020), Todd Haynes' *The Velvet Underground* (2021), and of course the three-part Peter Jackson docuseries *The Beatles: Get Back* (2021).

The floodgates would burst in 2018, especially after the awards-encrusted and financially successful *Queen* (2018) biopic dropped, and flooding would be assured after Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper swooned at one another, and fell in love in every awards show, press junket, and sound bite to support their version of *A Star is Born* (2018). *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), a film that handles the life and style of Queen's frontman with care and some poignancy...the film, however, was a technical nightmare --- directing issues, a master class in bad editing, and one astonishing set of fake teeth. Yet, in an obvious way...it was much less a film about a bands' internal struggles, and more a character study about acceptance paralleled with an approval by a heartless industry regarding their individuality and honesty. *A Star is Born* could have learned a lot from this film...and even more from its Judy Garland-led predecessor. Yet, *Rhapsody* lacks a certain edge that music and film lovers both expect and crave. Bradley Cooper's *Star* had an edge... but lost it in every scene that he failed to include Sam Elliot.

That same year, two other notable films about rock stars were released, each one about strong female musicians, and each starring tremendously talented and hugely star-powered leads, yet the films failed to make much of a dent --- in the box office, or in the consciousness of filmgoers; hell, maybe *Bohemian Rhapsody* submarined their momentum, or perhaps it was the fact that every time I turned on my car, the Gaga-Cooper duet "Shallow" never neglected to infect my ear drums, I don't know. What I *do* know, is that movies about rock stars tout the genius of the musicians, they showcase the hardships of life on the road, the difficulty of keeping the band together amongst raging egos, alcoholism and or drug abuse. What is seldom seen, is when a piece of cinema travels along those well-worn plotlines, and handles them with care, aptitude and a fierceness that makes them feel organic, and even more than that...new. Crowds at the Toronto International Film Festival got a taste of this, late in 2018...well, much less a taste and more a

whiff, at the Toronto International Film Festival (a whiff at TIFF?). Pardon the bad puns, but I'm talking about the punk/grunge motion picture, *Her Smell*. Not-so-similarly, the Natalie Portman-led *Vox Lux* (2018), supported by Jude Law and Willem Dafoe uses a "tragedy breeds stardom" story model, which, currently, doesn't resonate well with audiences who are forced to deal with mass shootings daily. It's an interesting turning point when you see a movie focused on a rock star born from tragedy and the audience doesn't seem to care about the rock star. I grew up in a time where rock stars and band posters littered my bedroom, from the floor to the ceiling, and band graffiti was the wallpaper inside every high school kid's locker. *Her Smell* felt the most like my high school and college days...something that I loved about the music and the conflict behind it was caught in the tenor of the film. *Vox Lux* was cold and un-feeling, and many scenes felt stilted and artificial. They each play on themes of motherhood, responsibility to self, band, and child...yet only one really balances on the tightrope, not looking down, and guiding you through the stomach drops of every wobbly moment, as you inch closer and closer to safety.

Alex Ross Perry's *Her Smell* (2018) reeks (sorry) of originality, albeit a little stained by the crassness of the "video" flashbacks of the band loving themselves in their raw and green state...those scenes feel a bit more staged, and a little less thought through, sort of jammed into the edit; however, they do their job, and they work, in a ham-fisted way. The film is a razor's edge character study of a band leader and 1990s rocker who seeks acceptance, desires a camera in her face, who eats and drinks acclaim and admiration, and blatantly *needs* to be worshipped. The drugs and substance abuse are a distant second to the addiction of self-hate which lead singer and guitarist Becky Something (Elisabeth Moss) unnecessarily conjures for herself. Before the story begins, she's submarined her loving marriage; she refuses years of help and love from her mother (Virginia Madsen); and, she rejects the idea that she is, herself, a parent --- because obviously, if Becky is forced to be a matriarch to her child rather than the tribe she designed and formed on stage, then she ceases to gain the attention and vacuous love she can manipulate from others.



Figure 1: Elisabeth Moss in *Her Smell*, courtesy of Bow and Arrow Entertainment; Gunpowder & Sky (2018)

Elisabeth Moss is excellent and unconfined as Becky, going from subtly strumming a guitar and improvising a beautiful, personal ditty when nobody is listening...to an atomic bomb, bouncing off the wall with a broken beer bottle, attempting to kill both her bandmates, and her baby girl. You see, even when the chords are mis-strummed or out of tune, her voice is sheer perfection. I'm wrong, they're not "songs" to her...they're hymns. She is a goddess...even when she's a tornado of incoherence, madness, and violence, her art is sheer brilliance. It's why her producer can't let her go...he knows she's bound to hit big at any second...yet she costs him half his life and "his second house" to help pay studio fees.

Pop-punk rock girls seek to take her place in the pantheon of she-punks as the 1990s fade away, and sludgy guitars are replaced by melodic-graced-harmonies --- punk in name only, monikers such as Dottie O.Z, Crassie Cassie, and Roxie Rotten, but the music lacks blood, sweat and a bad smell...the Becky Something smell, the pain, the exhaustion, and the bad odour that goes away when the music begins.

The film creates cinematic justice as it allows Becky to rip away the flesh from those around her, gnaw it hungrily, then wait for it to grow back...then chew it off again. It thoughtfully shows us a rock and roll star who simply can't have it both ways...even when she goes through the necessary and legal steps to do so. By the end of the film, Becky Something is the stinky musk of punk rock that exists in doilies and teapots without the steam (that's the last one, I promise) of embodying the punk-life day-by-day. If you can't live it 100%, but you can still live...? To Becky, that's fine if you have someone to live for.

Perhaps we'll see another resurgence of rock star movies, with the innumerable streaming outlets and production houses, we just may. But cinema audiences do have a lot of opportunities to look back at those that have been made-yet-unseen. Films shouldn't be released and quickly discarded, be sure to pick them up and give something a chance, even if it is from five years ago. Bad films, like grapes, can go bad and rot, but sometimes films age like wine. Be sure to check out my podcast --- "bad cliches and even worse puns."