

Nineties Hollywood sugar coats the Sixties

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REINVENTING INNOCENCE / Two new movies about pop's early days are set in the Sixties, but the decade is a much cleaner and prettier place on screen than it was in its chaotic, upsetting reality.

THE baby boomers just won't let go of the past, it seems, but they're more than willing to wash it clean.

Two new American movies, *Grace of My Heart* and *That Thing You Do*, use the legacy of Sixties' pop music to help refashion one of America's most turbulent decades as a time of innocence.

Portraying the Sixties without major social conflicts, obviously, takes some careful editing of reality, yet the defining issues of the decade are notably absent in both films. Vietnam is barely mentioned. The Bomb doesn't cast its shadow nor the Cold War its chill. Drugs are referred to just once in *Grace of My Heart*. The new post-Pill promiscuity doesn't exist. Nor does the civil-rights movement or racial tension: Black people in both films serve in the background, helpful touchstones of musical authenticity on the fringes of the white folks' showbiz success.

With baby boomers, it's particularly easy to confuse a generation's maturation with the larger historical shifts. Take away the global conflicts and economy, and you can simply imagine the movement from the communal Sixties to the Me Decade Seventies as the story of growing from innocence to adulthood.

The pop music of the era, which moves from collective experience to individual introspection, provides the soundtrack of that passage. In *Grace of My Heart*, for example, the 41-year-old American independent director Alison Anders (*Mi Vida Loco* and *Gas, Food, Lodging*) has created a fictional show-business biography along the lines of *The Rose* and *A Star is Born*. It tells the story of a pop songwriter, who first writes, anonymously, for the famous Brill Building song factory, creating hits for harmony pop groups. Later, older and wiser, she creates hits for herself as a solo artist.

Anders uses the Sixties as a canvas for a familiar movie-of-the-week soap opera of adversity and overcoming. At the same time, *Grace* also serves as a *film à clef* of the American Sixties' pop scene, with characters based on well-known personalities of the time.

The heroine, Edna (Ileana Douglas), is based on Carole King, the co-



The Wonders, a Sixties band that never was: from left Ethan Embry, Steve Zahn, Tom Hanks, Liv Tyler, Johnathon Schaech and Tom Everett Scott.

writer of early Sixties' teen hits such as *Up On The Roof* and *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow*, who later had a successful solo career in the seventies, with her best-selling *Tapestry* album. She is guided, in the film, by a kooky rock impresario (played by John Turturro) who's a composite of whiz-kid producer Phil Spector and music publisher Don Kirshner. Edna is hired to write for a closet lesbian singer (Brigitte Fonda) modelled on Lesley Gore. Later, she has a relationship with a surf-rock mad genius (Matt Dillon), inspired by The Beach Boys' Brian Wilson.

Anders has gone to some trouble to recreate the music of the era. Gerry Goffin contributed the movie's girl-group song, *Born to Love That Boy*, co-written with his daughter, Louise, and writer David Baerwald. Then, for a later era, the era of the singer-songwriter that Carole King became, **Joni Mitchell** was persuaded (by her ex-husband Larry Klein who supervised the film's music) to offer *Man from Mars*, a lament intended to sound like a song from Mitchell's *For the Roses* (1972) period.

The songs that attempt to capture

the earlier era are awkward (naiveté is hard to fake) but some of the tunes, especially the elaborate and dramatic *God Give Me Strength*, written by Elvis Costello and Burt Bacharach, amplify the emotional path of the story. Sung by Edna (actually the

voice of Kristen Vigard) as her first solo single when she strikes out on her own, the song is an emotionally charged epic, entirely suited to this old-fashioned showbiz biography in flower-child costume.

Although the story of *Grace Of My*

Heart covers some of the same time period as Tom Hanks's *That Thing You Do*, the music could not be much different. Partly, that's because Hanks's film chronicles a very specific kind of mid-Sixties' music, in the aftershock of The Beatles and the rest of the British invasion. As dozens of Beatle-esque bands hit the charts, the era of the songwriter-for-hire went into eclipse.

That Thing You Do tells of the brief glory of one such fictional one-hit-wonder group, The Wonders. For Hanks, 40, making this film was simply a case of seizing a career opportunity, as he said recently in Toronto.

"When I, or Al Pacino [who recently directed *Looking for Richard*] come to the studio and say we want to make a movie, they'll listen. Obviously we have a certain amount of clout. A certain number of people will go to the movies just to see what Tom Hanks or Al Pacino is up to. So, we'll get one chance to make a movie. Of course, it's just one chance."

Hanks's debut film as a writer-director is a testament to Hanks's commercial savvy. The quality of smart

innocence that he projects finds a perfect counterpart in his slight but diverting story. Like *Grace*, Hanks also writes his story to fit with the musical evolution of the era. By the end of the movie, the songwriter, of course, wants to go it alone. The drummer, the hero of the story, goes toward his own version of personal fulfillment: He pursues the higher creative ambitions of jazz.

Like Anders, Hanks chooses to create a period film about pop music using original music, but the tunes for him were simply generic reference points to the mood he wanted to create. He did not go to great effort to make distinctive songs.

"If you used authentic music of the era, you'd have to spend a lot of time researching this stuff and deciding whether you were going to go for obvious material or obscure songs," he explained.

"Whatever you pick, there will always be people who know the songs and have specific associations with them, and that will spoil the effect if they hear them in the movie. . . . We thought it was simpler just to create the songs."

Hanks linked up with producer Gary Goetzman (*Philadelphia*, *Stop Making Sense*), who earlier had worked in the record business. Goetzman introduced him to L.A. session-writer Mike Piccarillo. The three wrote most of the tunes, deliberately creating a generic pop soundtrack.

Part of the peculiar quality of *That Thing You Do*, apart from its lack of historical context, is that it's a kind of nostalgia for nostalgia. Hanks's film evokes another slice of nostalgic artifice, the TV sitcom *Happy Days*, a show on which Hanks once guest-starred and which was inspired by the success of the George Lucas movie, *American Graffiti* (1973).

Lucas's film is a milestone, the first movie to signal American pop culture had begun to look back over its shoulder with wry irony, instead of down the road ahead. But Hanks and Anders look at the Sixties from enough distance to treat the decade as an uncomplicated time, which lends itself to easy caricature. In our collective memory, the innocent pop songs of decades ago live on while the darker truths fade. By remembering a little, and forgetting a lot, we can keep pretending we've come a long way.