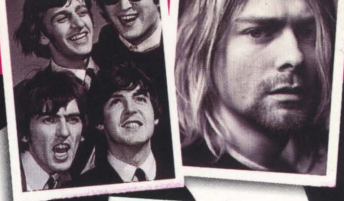


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When

New York's Brill Building gave birth to many of pop history's favourite songs. A new film celebrates the alumni of that famous address – and boasts an intriguing, all-new soundtrack. Jim Irvin reports.

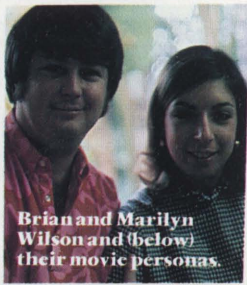
WHADDYAKNOW, YOU WAIT ages for a decent rock movie and then two come along at once. But while the first, *That Thing You Do!* – Tom Hanks's frothy fiction of a one-hit band riding the 1964 beat boom – was doing reasonable business Stateside last year, the second, a much subtler evocation of the period, was being shamefully overlooked.

Grace Of My Heart, written and directed by Alison Anders (previous work includes *Gas Food Lodging*), is the story of a young woman, Denise Waverley (played by Ileana Douglas) scoring a job as a songwriter in the Brill Building, creating a string of hits with her husband, divorcing, marrying a troubled genius surf-musician and entering the '70s as a successful solo singer. In other words, it's a biopic amalgam of Carole King, Lesley Gore, Cynthia Weil and Ellie Greenwich with affectionate nods to many of the key players in the American music scene of the '60s, among them Brian Wilson and Phil Spector.

"I was very moved by stories of women in the music business in the '60s," says Anders. "People like Lesley Gore, who had almost as many hits as Madonna had in the '80s, yet had no power at all. The music that came out of the Brill Building, particularly the girl group stuff, had a strong impact and influence on the way I see things."

Intriguingly, the film's soundtrack inhabits a parallel universe, achieving a credible sense of the times despite not including a single actual hit of the period.

"I thought if I put in songs that are recognisable, people would immediately be distracted," explains Anders. "I was so turned off by the *Forrest Gump*



Brian and Marilyn Wilson and (below) their movie personas.



we was Brill

WHAT GOES ON

remember driving down the street with it on in my car. I was out in the middle of fucking nowhere in the San Fernando Valley, getting totally lost, just crying and listening to this song over and over again and going, I can't believe this is for my movie!"

Persuading other writers to revisit their old styles wasn't so straightforward. Joni Mitchell wouldn't or couldn't recreate the feel of her *Blue* period ("I don't ever want to go back there, I don't ever want to be that vulnerable again," she told Anders) until one of her cats went missing. The beautiful resulting song, *Man From Mars*, sounds like the best of her work prior to *For The Roses*. Meanwhile, commissioned to write the kind of masochistic love song he created for girl groups in the early '60s, Gerry Goffin's first inclination was something in a more sophis-ticated vein.

"He wanted to do Cole Porter," says Klein. "I had to guide him back by saying that we really needed to recapture the feeling of songs like *He Hit Me And It Felt Like A Kiss*. 'Oh,' he said, 'you want me to write one of those dumb songs?' Then he had no trouble."

Like many of us, Anders doesn't consider those songs dumb in the least. "The great pop songs seem simple but have this dark, ironic undercurrent, sometimes they're far more heart-wrenching than even the most angsty rock songs.

Think of *Crying In The Rain*, that's kinda devastating."

When Goffin was shown a

rough cut of the film he was struck by the authenticity of the lives of its fictional characters. "He said, 'How did you know that I was messing around on Carole with the receptionist at the Brill Building?'" laughs Anders. "I said, 'I didn't, I made that up, but thanks for telling me!'"

Reflecting on the years she has devoted to this film, Anders doubts that modern songs and

their creators would be quite so inspirational and motivating. "It would be tough to do a movie like this around today's music. I'd like to think something will happen again, something quite as rich as in the '60s, but I doubt it. Modern songs are so internal and intellectual; they're not cathartic in the same way."



Brill Building at 49th and Broadway: "All that music had a strong impact on me," says director Anders.

Walter Weisman/Globe Photos, INC., Michael Ochs Archives/Redferns, Claudette Bortius

soundtrack where they had a whole decade of the most amazing work in music and just used the cheapest hits with no imagination. And it was chronologically out of synch, too. I hate that.

"A good soundtrack should spark an interest. By doing new stuff we could use the songs to move the narrative, point people towards the things actually recorded in that era and give some music back." All without the emotional baggage – not to mention expense – that comes with the real hits. Soundtrack producer Larry Klein and music supervisor Karyn Rachtman set about commissioning surviving songwriters of the period – Burt Bacharach, Gerry Goffin and Joni Mitchell among them – to contribute new material.

"What we tried to do," says Klein, "was group writers and musicians who actually played on the Brill Building songs with contemporary writers who were influenced by those records." Bacharach was paired with Elvis Costello for the film's keystone song, the soul-wringing *God*

Give Me Strength, superbly sung on the soundtrack by the velvet-voiced Kristen Vygard.

"I gave them the set-up," says Anders. "It had to be a ballad of the kind that Burt would have written for Dusty Springfield, but it had to reflect this loss that Denise had just had, a disastrous love affair."

"My vision of what they'd do," adds Klein, "was Burt's old style with an edgier Hal David, and they came up with exactly that, but in spades. I went over to Burt's and he played me the first demo – Elvis singing the song onto his answer-phone – and my jaw just dropped. They'd written a classic."

Alison was also stunned by the song. "I



Goffin & King (above), and (left) biopic versions.

