

Rock Around The Clock to Not Another Teen Movie: *The History of Teen Film*

Lucas Maxwell

Teen films truly began in the 1950s with the explosion of rock 'n' roll and the counter culture. Youth of the '50s were opposed to the nostalgia films that their parents enjoyed. They wanted movies like *Rock Around the Clock* starring Bill Haley and His Comets, who also played the title track, considered to be the first rock and roll song. This was the first movie dedicated to rock 'n' roll. The adult generation viewed this and similar movies with distaste and also fear. Movies such as *The Bad Seed* played upon these fears, portraying a young, adorable little girl who happened to be a serial killer.

Hollywood was happy to exploit this new, affluent teen market. They produced movies brimming with rebellion and rock 'n' roll such as *Blackboard Jungle* and *High School Confidential* featuring drug use, gang fights, drag racing and a slew of '50s slang words. Marlon Brando also became a symbol of anti-authoritarian rebellion in movies like *The Wild One*. He played an arrogant, rebellious leader of a roaming biker gang and subsequently ingrained the negative stereotype the public had and still has with bikers donning leather jackets and jeans. James Dean was the epitome of adolescent pain depicting an anguished, introspective teen in *Rebel Without A Cause*. Dean would only

star in three films before his death in 1955, forever remaining the angst-ridden teenager in the psyche of the viewing public.

The 1950s also saw the introduction of the cheap teen or "B" movie. Teens would attend outdoor drive-in theatres that showed cheap sci-fi and horror movies such as *The Blob*, *Attack of the Crab Monsters*, *The Wasp Woman* and *A Bucket of Blood*. These movies differed from previous sci-fi and horror flicks because they all depicted teenagers as the hero, villain or victim.

The early 1960s was the decade of teen beach movies. Actors like Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello became household names with movies like *Beach Blanket Bingo*, *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini* and other bikini-related films. These were campy, light and airy films having little to do with surfing or California culture. Rather they were an attempt at cashing in on the growing popularity of the surfing and beach life amongst the youth of the 1960s. Other popular beach movies of the early to mid 1960s were the slew of Hawaii-based Elvis Presley films. In the late '60s, movies like *Easy Rider* tried to encapsulate the spirit and energy of the decades' youth. Other movies that were very popular with youth were those that branched out from the conventional means of

filmmaking. These were films like *The Wild Bunch*, *Blow-Up* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. These films did not necessarily have teens with starring roles but they were indicative of the estrangement youth were experiencing with the mainstream during this tumultuous period.

British cinema of the 1960s saw a rise of grim, non-fictional social realism in films. It was dubbed "Kitchen Sink" film due to its angry, working class heroes, harsh dialogue and anti-establishment themes portrayed in a gritty format. These socially conscious films were also categorized as the "angry young man" films due to the fact that they mainly focused on the social situations of an angst-ridden male hero who tried to tear down

social restraints through alcohol, drugs and sex. These movies were important because they brought to light England's alienated youth in an honest and uncompromising way. Some of these movies include *The Leather Boys* and *Billy Liar*.

The 1970s saw the beginning of the summer blockbuster thanks to two movies in particular: *Jaws* in 1975 and *Star Wars* in 1977. Both of these movies were the first films to earn more than \$100 million in rentals. Another style of youth-oriented movie that emerged was nostalgia films.

American Graffiti depicted a number of teens living in California in the early 1960s who cruise the streets of their hometown in one long summer night. The film portrayed several teen archetypes of the time, including drag racers and nerdy students. "Teen Scream" films also became hugely popular in the 1970s thanks to a relatively un-

known director named John Carpenter whose low budget horror film *Halloween* became the highest grossing U.S. independent film of its time. The film depicted a teenage heroine and a serial killer who represented a dead teenager from years before.

The summer blockbuster theme continued into the 1980s with such films as *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Return of the Jedi*

and *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial* to name just a few. These movies took full advantage of new advances in CGI technology. One of the most notable teen genre directors of the 1980s was John Hughes who is best known for his coming of age dramatic comedies. These movies included *The Breakfast Club*, *Sixteen Candles* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. These films were praised by critics for their multi-layered portrayal of adolescence and the social hierarchies of high school. By the end of the 1980s many films were aimed at teens and



provided basic thrills with films such as *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* and *Die Hard*.

The early 1990s saw the rise of many coming of age dramas about young African Americans growing up in places like New

York and Los Angeles.

Movies like *Boyz in the Hood*, *New Jack City* and

Menace II Society portrayed a vivid sense of danger and racial tension.

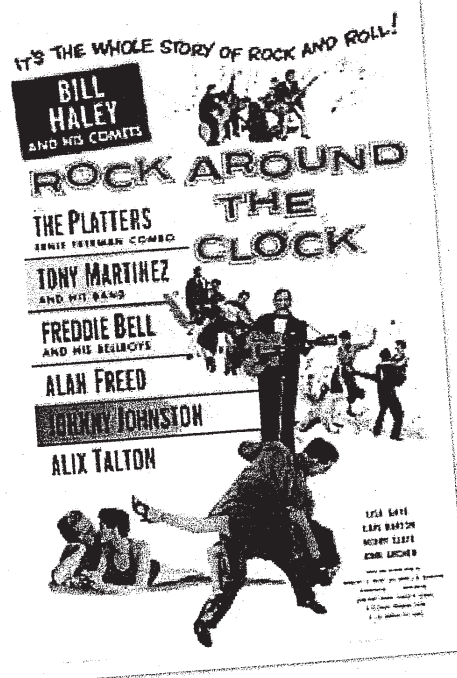
These films evoked real people's struggles to find tranquility within the grim urban realities of poverty stricken neighbourhoods with emotionally moving results.

Movies in the '90s also foretold new methods of internet-based marketing with the low budget, independent horror sensation *The Blair Witch Project*. The film ushered in the quasi-documentary genre with unknown actors and semi-improvised script. Another notable mention is the teen comedy *American Pie*, about four high school boys whose sole mission in life is to end their virginity. This movie harkens back to the *National Lampoon* series in the 1970s and to *Porky's* in the early '80s.

This trend continued into the 21st century with movies aimed at teen hormones like *Van Wilder* and *Road Trip*. Also on the rise are romantic teen

comedies such as *40 Days and 40 Nights*, *Down To You* and *Whatever It Takes*. Other movies have re-examined the social hierarchies of young females with such entries as *Mean Girls*. Many other films

such as *Disturbia* portray teens as smart and deceiving, not just angst-ridden and dopey. Another popular genre is the spoof film, such as *Not Another Teen Movie*, that attempts to tear apart every film genre in existence.



Further Reading

Bernstein, J. (1997). *Pretty in pink: The golden age of teenage movies*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

Doherty, T. (2002). *Teenagers and teenpics: The juvenilization of American movies in the 1950s*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Shary, T. (2002). *Generation multiplex: The image of youth in contemporary American cinema*. Texas: University of Texas Press.

Shary, T. (2005). *Teen movies: American youth on screen*. New York: Wallflower Press.

Tropiano, S. (2005). *Rebels and chicks: A history of the Hollywood teen movie*. New York: Watson Gup-till Publications.