

# GIRLS, ON FILM

Hopelessly devoted to 80s movies

## THE MUSICALS ISSUE

ANNIE — FORBIDDEN ZONE

THE MUPPETS TAKE MANHATTAN

BACK TO THE BEACH — POPEYE

THE GREAT ROCK AND ROLL SWINDLE

THE LITTLE MERMAID — SCHOOL DAZE

# GIRLS, ON FILM

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# LIGHTS, MUSIC, AND ALL THAT JAZZ...

Welcome to *Girls, on Film*, the fanzine that is hopelessly devoted to 80s movies! Each issue features eight movies released between 1980 - 1989 that share a particular theme. In this issue, we are discussing -- you guessed it -- musical films!

## THE LINER NOTES

### THE GREAT ROCK N' ROLL SWINDLE

(1980). Sex Pistols manager Malcom McLaren narrates the making of a boy band.

**POPEYE (1980).** Robert Altman's live-action musical comedy adaptation of the EC Segar comic is a delightfully strange flop starring Robin Williams and Shelly Duvall.

**ANNIE (1982).** Little orphan Annie spends a week living the high life at a billionaire's mansion.

**FORBIDDEN ZONE (1982).** Based on The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo theater troupe, this manic musical travels to an alternative universe.

**THE MUPPETS TAKE MANHATTAN (1984).** In the third *Muppets* movie, Kermit and the gang try to make it on Broadway.

**BACK TO THE BEACH (1987).** Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello became Midwest squares, but a trip to L.A. will change all that

in the ultimate beach party parody.

### SCHOOL DAZE (1988).

Everybody is beefing during Homecoming weekend at Mission College in Spike Lee's second feature film.

**THE LITTLE MERMAID (1989).** A mermaid falls in love with a human and is forced to make a deal with a sea witch.





## BEHIND THE ZINES

*Girls, on Film* is published quarterly. Digital issues are available for free on our website. Contact us about purchasing prints or doing collaborations or trades. We also invite 80s fans to guest for the zine. Send us a short bio and writing samples.

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### Stephanie McDevitt

Stephanie's one big disappointment in life is that she wasn't old enough to fully appreciate popular clothing styles in the 1980s, as she was mostly attired in paisley sweatsuits. A

full-time editor and occasional freelancer,

Stephanie looks nostalgically back on 80s films such as *Ernest*

*Goes to Camp*, *Adventures in Babysitting*, and *Can't Buy Me Love* and wishes she could pull

off the hairdos of Cindy Mancini and her friends.



### Janene Scelza

Janene has written a buttload of zines over the years. She spent her teen years combing musty video stores and public libraries for all the 80s movies she could find. There were lists! She's got plenty of favorites from the decade, but it's stylish indie films like *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Repo Man*, and *The Terminator* that she loves best.



## CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

### Dr. Rhonda Baughman

Rhonda, a teacher and freelance writer, raised adolescent hell in the 80s and the horror films of that era were her BFFs! She loves all of 80s pop culture, but nothing spoke to her quite like *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-O-Rama*, *Nightmare Sisters*, and *Reform School Girls*. She had a pink laminated Video Time Video rental card at 9 years old and she never looked back. Or forward, really; she still loves her VHS and sweet, sweet VCR. And let it be known: the scrunchie never died for Rhonda: she STILL wears one proudly!



### Matt Scelza

Matt loves to dissect and analyze everything. He is stoked to co-write with his sister, Janene. Matt has logged a lot of hours at the same video stores and public library film collections with Janene in search of odd and unusual titles. However, he's got too many favorites to name.

## THE CHAOTIC GUIDE TO CHAOS

# The Great Rock and Roll Swindle

by Dr. Rhonda Baughman

“Ever get the feeling you’ve been cheated?” – John Lydon (aka Johnny Rotten). There are lessons to be gleaned from rock and roll pandemonium – most of them exhausting. I’m too old now to fully lean into the lessons [1] from *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle* (1980)—Julien Temple’s British mockumentary about the rise and fall of iconic punk madmen the Sex Pistols. Oh, but once upon a time, I was obsessed with understanding those lessons, uncovering their true essence.

My friends and I endlessly waxed poetic about the Sex Pistols, about their music, their love lives, their movies, their interviews, their live shows, their original lineup, and their gift of anarchic punk. But now, after watching this film again after more than two decades, I understand the lessons presented in the film can mean anything you want them to mean ... kind of like punk rock itself [2].

Endless surface debate surrounded *Swindle*, and still does, as to sides: did you side with former Pistols’ manager Malcolm McLaren (who thought he had majority stake in the band’s success, since he was the self-proclaimed brains of the outfit); were you on the side of the Pistols (who wrote and arranged lyrics and music, memorably performing to often unpredictable crowds) and who had formed in 1975 [3], years before McLaren came in as their manager [4]? Or were you somewhere in the middle and just didn’t give a damn what these rock stars were whining on about but enjoyed watching them fight and snarl in interviews?



Despite that, I still remember where I was when my hipper friends mentioned *Swindle* to me for the first time – like many pointed historical events, I know where I was and who I was with and what I was doing when someone chimed in with “Hey, have you seen *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle*?” It sounded like a secret I needed to uncover.

If you were like me, though, after the secret was revealed, you returned to obsessing over punk fashion, listening to Never Mind the Bollocks, the Pistols’ influential 1977 (and only)



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full release [5], and re-watching and quoting Alex Cox's *Sid and Nancy* (1986)

instead. All three were much more entertaining than repeated viewings of *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle*.

Eventually, Temple returned with *The Filth and the Fury* (2000), a 20 year late documentary response to *Swindle*, finally telling the story of the Pistols' from the band's perspective.

There's a lot of written punk history as well that will tell the same story, more or less: *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (1996) by Legs McNeil and Gilian McCain; *England's Dreaming* (1991) by Jon Savage; and *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs* (1994) by John Lydon to recommend a few. Punk rock at its core is political and

musically naked, born of poverty and extreme emotions that are often difficult to understand, let alone contain; therefore, often angrily yelling and violently wielding instruments helped provide an outlet, the release of such intense, complex feelings.

If you don't have a headache by the end of *Swindle*, then you haven't watched the film properly. How I wished for subtitles while watching: obviously a no go for my vintage VHS copy, but even the DVD release I owned remained wholly uncooperative. The irony of a punk rock film being obstinate was not lost on me, so I muddled through as best I could: it's punk rock, so of course it would stand to reason everything in the film would be hard to follow.

Every aspect of the band and its members are surrounded, covered, layered in, and oozing drama and controversy—I mean, the film opens with people lighting things on fire. However, by the time *Swindle* was shot and released, the band had broken up, Johnny Rotten wanted nothing to do with the film, nor did original bassist Glen Matlock, and Sid Vicious had died in 1979, so those three only appear in archived footage.

Before *Swindle* could finally go to print, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) required the inclusion of the newspaper clippings seen at the film's end (re: Vicious' death and Spungen's murder) as well as numerous cuts: mostly shots of genitalia and knives. Other controversial images remain, however.

The film feels like something I made in high school with classmates for an Honors English project. We just cut scenes together that weren't necessarily linear or logical, but funny and synchronous to us, and if we liked the scene, we just found a way to pop it in! *Swin-*

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*dle* is much the same. I enjoyed the awkward Sid Vicious in his underwear mirror lip sync scene, as much as I enjoyed the ranting woman with ants on her face. The animated bits throughout the film are also fun, of course, but I started to become tired once I reached scenes of singing and dancing with a vacuum and naked beach calisthenics. It's that last one where I asked myself: what does it all mean? I still have no idea and I doubt anyone else did either.

While the viewer attempts to discern whether we're watching the band's rise, success, plateau, or fall (it's all visually, eerily similar in the *Swindle* world), there is some fantastic music to enjoy with a few interesting guests [6]. Listening and watching the old concert footage for *Holidays in the Sun* is particularly potent – Johnny Rotten does have stage presence (always did).

It's amazing to see how young Rotten was when he developed his onstage delivery, his persona: it's the same throughout his entire career and it's distinctly his. The Pistols' riverboat cruise performance of banned song "God Save the Queen"? Classic. Sid Vicious' Temple-directed music video from 1978 covering Sinatra's "My Way"? Mesmerizingly ridiculous. Their last San Francisco show including a cover of The Stooges' "No Fun" on the set list? Epic. The show Lydon utters the infamous line: "Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?" before exiting the stage? Priceless. But what the film really asks is this: what does rock and roll mean to you? I know what it means to me, but aside from the music itself, what's it mean to rock and roll? Temple was inspired by an article written by Lonnie Donegan titled "Rock and Roll - It's a *Swindle*" [7] to try and tell us, but beyond

that, the film's loose narrative and spazzy visual orientation works as best as it can to tempt the viewer into the raucous fever dream that's the Sex Pistols.

It's hard to tell what's truth, what's fiction, what's real and what's not. Repeatedly, I asked myself: Is this documentary footage? Is this the film? Are these dreams? Who is this S&M rubber-suited narrator? Who's the bathtub narrator? Why is Steve Jones dressed as a gumshoe? Are any of these interviews real? Look! Old concert footage! Is this a music video? Am I hearing fugitive train robber Ronnie Biggs sing right now?!

And therein lies the point of *Swindle*, for 2022: it's still hard in general to tell the difference between what's real and what's not – and in rock and roll, what difference does it make, anyway? Who's to say what's real and what's not, what's rock and what's roll? John Lydon once said, "I don't believe there's any such thing as rock 'n roll anymore" [8]. And to answer John,

after watching *Swindle* again, I would quote the great Billy Joel: "You may be wrong but for all I know you may be right" [9].



IT YIS WHAT IT YIS

## Popeye

by Janene Scelza & Matt Scelza

We, the authors of this essay, begin this issue about 80s musical films with a little confession: we don't care much for musicals. There are, of course, exceptions, but for the most part, films where characters spontaneously break into song now and again are not really our bag. And yet, there was one long-forgotten 80s musical that immediately came to mind when we, the whole of *Girls on Film*, started working on this issue, and that movie was *Popeye*.

*Popeye* was a constant in our childhood. Not the cinematic experience so much as its physical presence: a Disney channel preview recorded on a VHS tape labeled with a piece of masking tape just big enough to fit the name of the muttering, one-eyed Sailor Man. The only thing we could remember about the film was the wacky finale in which Popeye simultaneously battles his brute nemesis Bluto and a giant octopus puppet. That part was usually the natural stopping point when blind fast forwarding the tape to get to whatever came after *Popeye* that we preferred to watch instead. It's not that we hated the movie. In addition to being the less desirable genre, *Popeye* already felt utterly old-fashioned by the mid-1980s when we would have seen the movie. It might as well have been a Beetle Bailey. Eventually, we stopped resisting.

We found *Popeye* to be a delightful, yet strange affair. It is not the big, boisterous, colorful kind of production you might expect from either a musical or a live-action version of basically kid's stuff, though that seems to be what Disney and Paramount were hoping for. Everything about the film - the look, the humor, and even the music- is so muted.



It has a brown paisley and faded denim kind of late 70s vibe.

As many others have already noted, it is very much a Robert Altman film.

Cartoonist Jules Feiffer (illustrator of *The Phantom Tollbooth*), wrote the script, adapting EC Segar's original *Thimble Theater* comic, as it was considered to be more conducive to feature-length storytelling than the beloved Max Fleischer cartoon version that, while visually more appealing, was essentially the same hero-damsel-bully triangle [1]. Still, it plays out like several loosely connected episodic comic panels stitched together.

Popeye (Robin Williams, in his feature film debut) arrives in the ramshackle seaside village of Sweethaven ("God must love us...") in search of the curmudgeonly, kid-hating father (Ray Walston) who abandoned him as a child. For some reason, Popeye still adores him. He may be all (prosthetic) muscle, but he's got a sensitive side, too, which people might notice if he didn't mutter so much. Exsqueeze me? This movie must hold some kind of record for ADR looping.

Popeye stays at the Oyl family boarding house where he meets hoity-toity Olive



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(Shelly Duvall). She's engaged to monosyllabic meathead Bluto (Paul L. Smith), but it's a mistake. "He's large, but he's mine," she sings in half-hearted defense as she quietly slips away during their engagement party while Bluto cartoonishly terrorizes guests with petal-plucking predictions as to whether she'll actually marry him.

Not much happens in the movie until Olive bumps into Popeye and they discover an abandoned infant they name Swee'pea (because Baby Oyl simply will not do!), played by Robert Altman's grandson. The trio instantly form a surrogate family. Popeye proves to be a protective family man. Olive finds him a caring gent (longing stares are the extent of the romance), though her maternal instincts need some work. (Swee'pea is an amalgam of the original character and Popeye's magical animal friend, Jeep, which was too difficult to recreate for the pre-CGI live-action film. So, the baby is clairvoyant [2]).

Meanwhile Bluto steams from afar, plotting revenge with the help of the local hamburger addict (oh Wimpie, how could you!) and the nutty Commodore. Of course, it's nothing a little spinach can't help, even though Popeye hates the stuff in the Segar version. The finale with the aforementioned giant octopus is wonderfully dopey. It's not a great film,

simply... pleasant.

As adults, we can also appreciate the film's rather enigmatic context as much as the movie itself. Disney and Paramount teamed up to make *Popeye* after Columbia Pictures won the bidding war to turn another Depression-era comic strip into a big-budget musical: *Annie* (see Stephanie's essay in this issue). It was an easy Plan B; Paramount already owned the rights to *Popeye*. It was a movie borne of crass commercialism, handed to a stubbornly independent director, lambasted by critics, and though it fared decently at the box office, it was never the hit that Disney and Paramount expected.

In addition to Feiffer as screenwriter, Harry Nilsson took a break from his *Flash Harry* album – but not the drugs – to write the music [3].



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The short list for directors came down to two wildly different personalities: comedian Jerry Lewis and “auteur” Robert Altman [4], who was reeling from a few flops and really needed a win, though he wouldn’t really get one until 1992 with *The Player*.

Despite promises to play nice, Altman moved the production away from the watchful eye of studio executives to the island of Malta. There, they spent several months building the sets. If you want to check out their handiwork, head over to the Sweethaven set. It’s still standing, now as a brightly painted tourist attraction called Popeye Village [5] where, among other things, Carnival is celebrated in modified Popeye costumes.

Dustin Hoffman and Lily Tomlin were first choices for the leads. Robin Williams, who was a rising TV comedy actor, was assumed to be a safe substitute when Hoffman backed out. Meanwhile, Shelly Duvall had previously worked with Altman on *Nashville* (1975). (Frankly, Williams made an OK Popeye for this kind of *Popeye*, but Duvall was a perfect choice for Olive Oyl). There are also many notable faces among the sprawling supporting cast, including Paul Dooley as Wimpie, David Moffat as the omniscient Tax Man, Linda Hunt, in her own film debut, as a wrestler’s mute mother, and Dennis Franz and Alan Autry as two goons who instigate a fight with Popeye in a restaurant.

Production was plagued with problems that seemed to owe to most of the complaints about the film like the lack of a central story, the indiscernible dialogue, and the flat music

[6]. Once the budget went over \$20 million, Paramount pulled the plug and told Altman to return to California with what he had [7].

Whether *Popeye* deserved its reputation as an epic flop we’re not too sure. It fared decently at the box office for a movie that never really found an audience, was a mixed bag for critics, and was on the Stinkers Bad Movie Award ballot twice, 25 years apart (RUDE!). But it was no *Annie*, and that was enough to send Altman fleeing to Paris and Williams worrying about his career.

We, two people who don’t care much for musicals and avoided this particular film for years, recommend watching it (you can rent it online). There were long-time rumors about a CGI remake starring Jim Carey and Amy Adams, but we can’t tell what the status of that project is these days, particularly considering Carey’s retirement rumors of late.



# THE SUN'LL COME OUT

## Annie

by Stephanie McDevitt

The 1982 musical *Annie* is based on the 1977 Broadway musical of the same name, which is based on the *Little Orphan Annie* comic strip written by Harold Gray [1]. If you've ever seen the *Annie* comic strip, you know that all the characters had terrifying, white eyes with no pupils. I am happy to report that the actors in this movie all have normal eyes, and they all give good performances in what turns out to be a fun, but maybe not the greatest, movie musical.

Aileen Quinn beat out 8000 other girls for the part of Annie, including Drew Barrymore, Kristen Chenoweth, and Elizabeth Berkeley [2]. Carol Burnette turns in a great performance as Miss Hannigan, but Bette Midler was the first choice for the part. Sean Connery and Cary Grant were options for the Warbucks role, which eventually went to Albert Finney [3]. Finally, Tim Curry played Rooster, a part that almost went to Steve Martin [4]. I love Steve Martin, but Curry plays this role with a slimy presence that I'm not sure Martin could pull off. I think we can all agree that with any of these alternate casting choices, this would be a very different movie.

*Annie* was filmed at Monmouth University in New Jersey, which has two mansions on campus. The mansion used as the Warbucks home was originally owned by Hubert Templeton Parson, the then-president of Woolworths [5]. Many of the street scenes were filmed at Warner Bros. Burbank studios. Production Designer Dale Hennesy changed up the "tenement style" set at Warner Bros for *Annie*.



He brought in actual New York fire escapes and other elements to make it look realistic [6]. This was one reason why *Annie* was, at the time, one of the most expensive films and the most expensive musical ever (budgeted around \$59 million) [7].

In this movie, set in Depression-era New York City, Annie (Aileen Quinn) resides in an orphanage for girls run by the drunk, man-crazy Miss Hannigan (Carol Burnett). The orphanage seems like a terrible place. Miss Hannigan forces the girls to clean all the time and only feeds them mush (I imagine she abuses them in other ways, but this movie was rated PG, so we don't see her beating them). She admits to not liking girls, but it seems she especially hates Annie.

Annie seems to be pretty popular among the orphans. She's smart, gregarious, and



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tries to escape from the orphanage in the dirty laundry bin (we only see one escape in the movie, but it's implied that she's tried a few other times). In her most recent escape attempt, she befriends a stray dog, who she names Sandy, and brings the dog back to the orphanage when she's caught and returned to Miss Hannigan.

One day, Grace Farrell (Anne Reinking), the personal secretary to well-known billionaire Oliver Warbucks (Albert Finney), comes to the orphanage. She tells Miss Hannigan that Mr. Warbucks would like to invite an orphan to come live with him for a week. He's trying to soften his image in the press, so why not exploit a small orphaned child? Warbucks made his money during WWI as an arms dealer (get it? War bucks) [8], and often talks about his love of money and capitalism, so I can see why he needed to soften his image during the Depression. Anyway, Annie manipulates the situation and gets

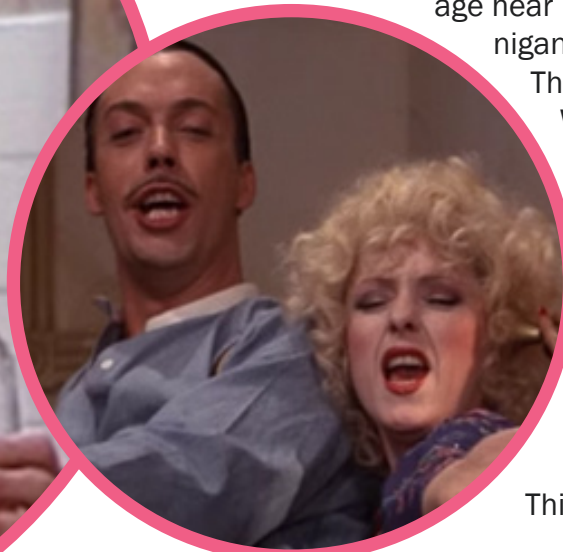
Grace Farrell to bring her (and Sandy) to Mr. Warbucks' mansion for the week.

Annie is welcomed into the mansion in a big song and dance number performed by all of the people who work there. Oliver comes home and states he would have preferred a boy orphan. Annie convinces him to let her stay, and thus starts her week in the lap of luxury. Eventually, Grace convinces Oliver that they should adopt Annie. When Oliver tells Annie, she says no thanks because she knows her parents are going to come back for her, and she'll know them because they'll have the other half of her broken locket. So, Oliver decides to start a nationwide search to find her parents in which he offers a \$10,000 reward.

Meanwhile, back at the orphanage, Miss Hannigan gets a visit from her brother, Rooster (Tim Curry), and his girlfriend, Lily (Bernadette Peters). They hatch a scheme in which Rooster and Lily will pretend to be Annie's parents and they will split the money three ways. You see, Miss Hannigan knows the truth about Annie's parents—they died in a fire years ago. Miss Hannigan has all of Annie's possessions, so she gives Rooster the other half of the broken locket, and then they all head to the Warbucks mansion to kidnap Annie.

Luckily for Annie, her friends at the orphanage hear Rooster and Miss Hannigan talking about their plan. They set off to try to warn Warbucks before it's too late. So the movie hits its crescendo with the Orphans running through Manhattan to try to save Annie and Annie trying to escape the clutches of Rooster and Miss Hannigan.

This movie version of *Annie*





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has several differences from the musical. First, the musical takes place at Christmas. Because this movie was shot during the summer, Annie is kidnapped the night before

the 4th of July. Also, in the musical, the Secret Service foils Rooster's plan before he gets to Annie. In the movie, Annie is actually kidnapped, and the Warbucks security team (depicted with a good number of cultural stereotypes) has to rescue her [9].

One other change, and my biggest issue with the movie, is that Miss Hannigan is redeemed at the end. In the musical, she is arrested along with Rooster and Lily. In the movie, Annie rips up the check from Warbucks and runs away. Rooster says he's going to kill her, and Miss Hannigan tries to stop him, which I guess was enough reason for her not to go to jail. But she's still involved in the kidnapping plot (and what about the child abuse at the orphanage?). Why wouldn't she go to jail? Instead, at the end she's at the Warbucks 4th of July party.

I think my favorite story about *Annie* surrounded the production of the musical number "Easy Street," the song Rooster, Lily, and Miss Hannigan sing while planning to kidnap Annie. It was supposed to be the biggest musical number in the movie with a million-dollar, specially-created outdoor street set. It took a week to shoot, but the filmmakers decided it was totally overdone. So, two months after filming ended, they brought Burnett, Curry, and Peters back in to re-shoot it in a more intimate setting [10]. However, in between the time shooting ended and the re-shoot happened, Burnett had undergone surgery

to correct an underbite and realign her jaw, so her face looked different. She told Director John Huston that two months ago she didn't have a chin, and his response was, "Dear, just come out looking determined" [11].

Burnett, Curry, and Peters definitely give the strongest performances in this movie. They are so fun to watch, and "Easy Street" is my favorite musical number. Burnett nabbed a Golden Globe nomination for Best Actress, and Aileen Quinn was nominated for New Star of the Year. However, Quinn also got Razzie nominations for Worst Supporting Actress and Worst New Star. I didn't think she was that bad. Her performance is a little over the top at times, but I thought she did an okay job. I'd also like to give a shout out to Ann Reinking, who was a Broadway choreographer, dancer, actress, and singer. I love watching her dance in this movie, and while her character wasn't very well developed, she is definitely a high point for me.

*Annie* got mixed reviews and, while it grossed \$57 million in the US and Canada, it was considered a bust because it was so expensive to make [12]. The story of *Annie* lives on in other remakes in a variety of media. I liked this movie as a kid, and while I found it to be way too long in my most recent viewing (the Netflix version was two hours), I thought it held up OK. Check it out if you've never seen it. It's worth it for Burnett's performance.



## ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK

# Forbidden Zone

by Dr. Rhonda Baughman

Enter this *Zone* at your own risk: this flick is a Witch's Egg imbrolio and by the end, a nightmare seizure musical trauma response. Revisiting, researching, and writing about the films you once loved, at least in any professionally subjective way, can be a mixed bag. For example, this essay: what started out as a sunshine stroll down recollection road quickly turned into a combination trigger warning/love letter. That's pretty weird, right? Frankly though, 'weird' fits right in with the whole *Forbidden Zone* aesthetic.

I fell in love watching *Forbidden Zone* hijinks for the first time in 2006 [1]. I was on a date at the time – so, I not only fell in love in real life, but also found artistic love with film cast/crew: Danny Elfman (actor, Satan/music), Richard Elfman (story/director), Susan Tyrrell (actress, Queen Doris), and Matthew Bright (screenwriter). So much has been written already about the musical life and scoring times of Danny Elfman [2] (*Forbidden Zone* is his soundtrack debut, and it's one of the more memorable pebbles skipped across the Elfman pond ripples that continue to be felt for many reasons [3]).

But now, in 2022, it's not the Elfman nostalgia, Bright's writing, or even that magical first date I feel rippling for long when rewatching *Zone* – no, it's legendary performer Susan Tyrrell. *Zone* is a shadowbox for Tyrrell: she's brought her A-game, all charisma and fearlessness and audacity and though unlike her performances of the 60s and '70 [4,5] her portrayal in *Forbidden* as Queen Doris of the Sixth Dimension is no less brave (and telling) regarding the woman herself [6].

But what is the *Forbidden Zone*, exactly?



Based upon The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo, a Los Angeles theater troupe formed in 1972 by Richard Elfman, it is the 6th dimension, an alternate universe, a place dedicated to the macabre, the weird, and the manic. Especially the manic. Lots of manic: dialogue, singing, dancing, camerawork, humping, you name it—it's manic. Depending on the cut/release you watch, you can view the mania in b/w or in color!

The *Zone* is not for the squeamish: Pimp Huckleberry P. Jones (Gene Cunningham but credited as Ugh-Fudge Bwana) escapes the 6th Dimension (although I wonder why he didn't stay), moves out and sells his house to the Hercules family. Soon everyone realizes their new abode contains a door to the 6th dimension. Or perhaps they knew all along – this is murky.

After spending eight minutes with the Hercules clan, I wished the pimp had hung around: my retinas felt raw, punched with hyper-homage to the Roaring 20s, as well as nods to porn and vaudevillian skits strung together by ... nothing. I turned on the subtitles early. Fortunately, those subtitles did help me to follow lyrics and dialogue, but those same subtitles did not assist me in



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comprehending anything on screen. Maybe Elfman wanted to see how weird his tribute to *The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo* could get? Kudos if that was intended [7].

*Forbidden Zone*'s curated punk, zany mischief, and loose plot isn't so much a film as it is a Mad Libs-type experience [8]. After we're introduced to the Hercules family including Ma (Virginia Rose) and Pa (also Gene Cunningham), siblings Frenchy (Marie Pascale-Elfman) and Flash (Phil Gordon) Hercules walks to school, encounters Squeezit Henderson (Matthew Bright, credited as Toshiro Boloney) in a trashcan, who mentions his transgender sister René (Bright also) has entered that basement door to the 6th Dimension. From there, we meet the topless Princess (Gisele Lindley), the midget King Fausto (Hervé Villechaize), his queen Doris (Susan Tyrrell), and their frog butler Bust Rod (Jan Stuart Schwartz). Characters run amok and eventually visit Cell 63 where the concubines live – René is among them—and "characters" is used here in broad terms – since beyond recognizing the Kipper Kids, there are main cast and many extras moving so quickly as to be barely distinguishable from each other.

Interrupting the mayhem for a moment was a genuine laugh – which escaped my lips while reading a subtitle that merely stated: (nonsensical singing). I also whispered no kidding to my viewing companion – who had fallen asleep. *Zone*'s plot becomes increasingly unwieldy. It's difficult for the viewer to orient to any setting. I'm reminded by my viewing companion (who woke at some point) that

Queen Doris wants to kill Frenchy, the ex-queen wants to kill Doris, and the Princess is a hostage, before he returns to sleep. Before the end, where characters discuss world/galaxy domination and the credits roll, Tyrrell delivers one truly beautiful line of easily understood dialogue before her character's death: "Oh, life was so beautiful. Why does it feel so good to be so bad?"

Before that even, Susan Tyrrell's entrance and rendition of a song she co-wrote titled "Witch's Egg" [9] is the only other vaguely coherent moment. Lyrics include: "I laid down with the devil and his side-kick Mankind ... My life is like nobody else's / There's only one of me ... 'Cause I was hatched out of a witch's egg / Been doomed to fly high / Like a crane with no legs."

This is the only stand out song on the soundtrack for me – as much as I appreciate Elfman's score and other tinkering over musical legends like Cab Calloway and Josephine Baker, it's Tyrrell's voice that rings true and listenable now: I was struck with the need to pull out my *Forbidden Zone* soundtrack, to





## Girls, on Film

listen to  
"Witch's Egg" as  
a stand-alone poem to the woman I admired.  
The LP is a beautiful, translucent green gem  
that, surprisingly, has not gone up in value—  
but let's talk about that for a moment: the  
idea of value.

"Susan deserves the attention. Thank you for allowing me to remember my friend; I have more and better memories of Susan than I do with just about anyone I've worked with," Tyrrell's friend and co-star Andras Jones [10] said to me when I called him to chat for this essay. I'd recently listened to Andras and his podcast co-host discuss Tyrrell's film *September 30, 1955* (1977) [11] and Jones' first film with Tyrrell [*Far From Home* (1989)] has been a favorite of mine for decades. I listen to Andras regale me with tales of rehearsals in Gerlach, NV with Susan, of Hollywood parties at her home, and her proclivity for pickled eggs.

"She was such a heavyweight, and I was so young, so out of my depth. But it was such an honor working with her – she elevated our scenes, brought me up, brought our dynamic to a whole new level with her phrasing and natural snarl," Jones says. As is my investigative journalist way, I had to ask Jones, too, if the Tyrrell interview I found buried on the internet meant what I thought it did. "Yes," Jones said. "It's one of the earliest memories I have of meeting Susan."

One of the first things I remember hearing in her voice. I was not the first person she said this, too, either. The way she said it, too was beyond resignation, as if she knew no one would listen or do anything." I'm referring to the March 3, 1992 Joan Quinn interview of Tyrrell. In this interview, Tyrrell says: "After every picture I've made, I disappear ... I have a long career of shame, of things I am incredibly ashamed of ... " (and when asked about her relationship with director John Huston) "Don't ever call it an affair. In my show (referencing her one-woman show *My Rotten Life: A Bitter Operetta*) she says, 'He was a grandfather to me but in Hollywood, grandfathers rape you.'"

Quinn clearly has no idea how to respond and quickly moves on – this was 1992. According to Jones, Tyrrell was direct in this way and understood Hollywood toxicity long before the #metoo movement brought it into focus [12]. She did refer to her time on *Fat City* (1972) as "the film where John Huston raped me." Tyrrell worked her craft and would not allow the corrupt, grotesque nature of Hollywood to stop her, nor define her. Jones says, "For as aggressive as Susan could appear, she was also a protector. She was tough but also, I believe, deeply hurt."

The charisma of her earlier films wasn't gone, but it had turned into something else, a tough broad, I think, but she also referred to herself in this way when I knew her. I believe she carried such a huge weight within her, to bring to the screen what she did, to radiate sensitivity as she did, to come from truth as she did; she used the trick of alchemy to transform her trauma as best she could. She was open and generous and helped so many people in her lifetime, including other people who have come forward about abuse in Hollywood. I just wish more people, people who could help, had heard her, believed her [13]. I remember Susan most though for her generosity and her huge heart."

## TOGETHER AGAIN

# The Muppets Take Manhattan

by Stephanie McDevitt

*The Muppets Take Manhattan* is my favorite Muppet movie. Don't get me wrong, I love most of the Muppet movies, but this one had a special place in my childhood as one of those movies we watched over and over again. Even with this most recent re-watching, I know every word to every song, and I can probably repeat most of the dialogue. It's a fun, family-friendly movie filled with typical Muppet humor and lunacy.

The Muppeteers for this movie included Jim Henson, Frank Oz, Jerry Nelson, Richard Hunt, Dave Goelz, and Steve Whitmire. All of these guys were long-time puppeteers on multiple Henson projects. Frank Oz, however, was a first-time director on *Muppets Take Manhattan*. Henson had planned to direct it, but he had just directed *The Great Muppet Caper* and *The Dark Crystal* back to back and decided he was too busy to direct this movie, so Oz took the reins. In addition to directing, Oz also did considerable work on the script [1].

The actors in this movie held their own with the puppeteers, especially Louis Zorich, who plays Pete the diner owner. Pete is kind of a Muppet himself, with a thick accent and a tendency to give out nonsensical advice, but he's nice enough to employ Kermit, Rizzo the Rat, and all of Rizzo's rat friends. Juliana Donald, who played Jenny (Pete's daughter), made her film debut in this movie. According to *Mental Floss*, she was cast because she could talk to Kermit and make it look natural.



She said, "I was told that the problem they were having was finding someone who looked like they were really talking to the Muppets, not talking at them" [2]. She does a good job talking with the Muppets. I think all the actors were believable in that respect.

In typical Muppet fashion, this movie had several great cameos. Joan Rivers, Elliott Gould (also in *The Muppet Movie*), Gregory Hines, Liza Minelli, Brooke Shields, Frances Bergen, and NY Mayor Ed Koch all make



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appear-  
ances.

Originally,  
Dustin Hoffman,  
Steve Martin, Michael Jack-  
son, Lily Tomlin, Richard  
Pryor, and Laurence  
Olivier were slated  
to guest star.



Hoffman was  
supposed to  
play a Broad-  
way producer  
and planned  
to do an imi-  
tation of film  
producer Robert  
Evans. However,  
Hoffman thought  
that the role might be

offensive to Evans and  
dropped out, which led to all  
the other stars exiting the movie. Because of  
the lost cameos, the writers had to rewrite  
most of the dialogue [3].

The dialogue is fun and full of jokes, like  
most Muppet productions, and the plot of  
this movie is pretty simple. After graduating  
from college, Kermit and the gang decide to  
take the show they wrote for their senior-year  
production (*Manhattan Melodies*) and try  
to make it on Broadway. They arrive in New  
York with no money and, after striking out  
over and over, the Muppets decide it would  
be best if they split up to find work. Eventu-  
ally Kermit gets a producer to agree to do

the show, but before he can even tell his  
friends, Kermit goes missing. All the Muppets  
make their way back to New York to rehearse  
and search for him. With opening night fast  
approaching, the Muppets have to decide if  
they're going to do the show without Kermit.

Similar to *The Muppet Movie*, *Muppets Take  
Manhattan* shows the gang attempting to  
make it in the entertainment industry. But,  
when things get rough, they all have to figure  
out how to make money to survive. Through-  
out the movie Kermit gets letters from all  
of his friends telling him they're doing great  
(they're not) and exaggerating their profes-  
sional accomplishments. Dr. Teeth and the  
Electric Mayhem get a job playing polka at  
a retirement home in Pittsburg, Rowlf works  
at a dog kennel in Delaware, and Gonzo  
attempts to develop a water skiing act with  
Camila. The movie contrasts the letters  
bragging about their lives with scenes of how  
miserable they all are, and those scenes are  
some of the best in the movie. They're all so  
ridiculous (especially Gonzo's water skiing  
act). As he goes through the letters, Kermit  
can't help but notice that the only one who  
hasn't written is Miss Piggy.

This movie really made me hate Miss Piggy.  
She sucks. Miss Piggy never actually leaves  
NY (despite a very dramatic goodbye at the  
train station). Instead of just staying and  
helping Kermit, she pretends to leave, gets a  
job working at a perfume counter at Macy's,  
spies on Kermit, and has jealousy-induced  
rage every time she sees Jenny and Kermit  
together (they're just friends). Then at the  
end, it looks like she tricks Kermit into marry-  
ing her. Who does that?

In an article for *Tor.com*, Emmet Asher Per-  
rin discusses their wedding at the end of  
*Manhattan Melodies*. We know there was  
supposed to be a wedding at the end of the

## The Musicals Issue

show because, when the preacher comes out to marry them, Kermit asks why Gonzo isn't playing the preacher. So, it seems the wedding was a real, rehearsed scene. Piggy, however, got someone else to take Gonzo's place. Perrin points out, "we've got two levels: they're acting in a play on Broadway where they get married, but now it looks like the character Miss Piggy is trying to get the character Kermit the Frog to marry her within the film" [4]. But, here's the rub: the guy who plays the minister is Cyril Jenkins, a former pastor of the Rutgers Presbyterian Church of Manhattan – he's an actual minister in real life.

So, is there another level here? After all those years of chasing after Kermit on *The Muppet Show*, does Miss Piggy the actor finally marry Kermit the actor by staging a wedding in a movie about a play in which they get married? According to Perrin, Piggy tried to trick Kermit into marrying her on *The Muppet Show* in a similar fashion [5]. That seems suspicious. In an interview for Tough Pigs (a great Muppet website), writer David Misch said, "Jim wanted ambiguity about whether Kermit and Piggy were 'really' married, not just in the movie, to drum up interest" [6]. So, we don't actually know if the two married, but we do know that Miss Piggy could probably have calmed the hell down. They just graduated from college! Why not take time to grow up and work on their budding Broadway careers before forcing Kermit to tie the knot?

In addition to addressing the wedding, Misch also talks about the flashback scene in *Muppets Take Manhattan* in which we see the first appearance of the Muppet Babies. Kermit and Piggy take a carriage ride in Central Park, and, during the ride,



Piggy imagines what it would have been like if she had known Kermit as a baby. There is a whole Muppet Babies sequence with Fozzie, Rowlf, Gonzo, and Scooter singing "I'm Gonna Always Love You." Misch said it was a marketing ploy to promote *The Muppet Babies*, Henson's upcoming 30-minute cartoon [7]. In September of 1984, two months after this movie came out, *The Muppet Babies* debuted on CBS and ran for six years [8].

Like most movies we discuss, *Muppets Take Manhattan* almost got a remake of sorts. Actor Josh Gad was in talks to develop a TV series for Disney+, which would have taken place after the events of this movie. However, that project was canceled [9]. In 2018 Kermit did an interview with *Theater Mania* in which he said he'd love to revive *Manhattan Melodies*. He said, "Well, it certainly would be fun to do a revival of *Manhattan Melodies*, and I'd sure like to be in the production myself. But if I had to recast my role in the *Manhattan Melodies*, I'd go with the supremely talented singer, dancer, and actor Neil Patrick Harris. I just hope he doesn't mind playing opposite Miss Piggy; she's contractually obligated to play herself" [10]. I would definitely see that revival.



If you're looking for something silly and light, put this movie in your queue. Keep an eye out for one somewhat terrifying Muppet moment when a human-size Miss Piggy on roller skates, shown from a distance, angrily chases a guy who stole her purse. Aside from that scene, *Muppets Take Manhattan* is an enjoyable, funny movie.



## FRANKIE & ANNETTE GET THEIR GROOVE BACK

### Back to the Beach

by Janene Scelza & Matt Scelza

Outside of Frankie Avalon's music career (though who can ignore 31 charting US Billboard singles?) and Annette Funicello's stint as one of the most popular Mouseketeers, the pair may be best known for the slew of beach party movies they appeared in together back in the 1960s. Those movies brought 1950s white-bred sensibilities to a tumultuous decade. That wasn't a political statement or anything. American International Pictures (AIP), which pumped out an ungodly amount of B-movie gold – including the eyebrow-raising *Thing With Two Heads* where the head of a nasty old racist is transplanted onto the body of a

black convict (this nonsense was in 1972, y'all) — was looking to tap the lucrative teen market. And, tap it they did.

AIP's beach party movies were said to be their most profitable [1]. The first of these films debuted in 1963 with — what else? — *Beach Party*. It followed with nine more films, ending in 1966 with *Ghost in the Invisible Bikini*. (Not all movies take place at the beach, such as *Ski Party*). Frankie and Annette appeared in all but the last one, although they were originally supposed to be in that one as well [2]. (These were not the only beach party movies; there were plenty of imitators beyond the AIP titles).

Inspired by *Gidget* and the Elvis Presley musicals, these dopey, low-budget movies followed a formula. [3] They involved teenagers or college-age kids who love partying, surfing, and smooching. Rival beach-goers like biker gangs or uppity jocks or square or meddling adults would stir up trouble that would culminate in some over-the-top finale. These films also heavily featured music and dancing and included several notable guest stars (Buster Keaton showed up in a lot of the AIP beach party movies). (The Royal Ocean Film Society's brief video about the genre is worth a watch [4]).

This wonderfully ridiculous genre inspired some great parodies. (Betty White fans can check her out as a biker gang babe on *The Carol Burnett Show*). But, the 1987 musical comedy *Back to the Beach* was the beach party parody to end all





## The Musicals Issue

beach party parodies, not because it's the best, but because Frankie & Annette reunite to poke fun at their own movies. In the words of Miranda Hart's TV mum: "SUCH FUN!"

*Back to the Beach* catches up with Frankie and Annette 25 years after their last beach party movie. They are married and living in Ohio. Their young punk rock son, Bobby (Damien Slade, AKA the tenacious paperboy in *Better Off Dead*, AKA brother of Max Elliott Slade of the *3 Ninjas* trilogy), brings us up to speed on their life so far.

Frankie gave up surfing after a big wave accident that he can't stop talking about. The only boards he rides are props for the TV commercials he makes for his car dealership. Life in the Midwest seems to have broken Annette's brain altogether. Retaining her signature 1960s style, her answer to every problem is to go shopping. Her kitchen is stocked with Campbell soup, Heinz ketchup, and Skippy peanut butter (a recipe for poverty Pho?), and she can't seem to compute Bobby's pleas for spontaneity. It's bad, Daddy-O.

The family plans a vacation to Hawaii with a stop in L.A. to surprise their daughter, Sandi, played by Lori Loughlin, who gets to wear some awesome, uber-80s print bikinis. The problem is that Sandi has been keeping her surfer fiancée Michael (Tommy Hinkley) a secret. When she discovers that her family is in town, she tells Michael to skidaddle for

a while rather than just fess up. Naturally, it creates a rift between the lovebirds.

They're not the only ones. Frankie is miserable and Annette hopes revisiting their old haunt will rekindle his excitement. It does, but not until he runs into bad girl Connie (Connie Stevens), his voluptuous old flame. Annette is jealous and she and Frankie get into a big dumb fight.



Annette gets quality time with Sandi (Bobby befriends a beach punk gang and disappears for most of the movie), hosting pajama parties — a reference to *Pajama Party* (1964) — and performing duets on the beach with the ska band Fishbone. Frankie, meanwhile, drinks himself

into a stupor and wakes up at the same surfer pad where Michael is temporarily crashing. They get to know each other (Michael spills the beans about the engagement). Frankie reminisces about his glory days. Michael convinces Frankie that he's a good guy for Sandi. And Frankie helps Michael, a surfboard shaper, start his own business.

Frankie and Annette and Sandi and Michael eventually kiss and make up at a big beach bonfire



## Girls, on Film



party. (Check out Don Adams, voice of the original Inspector Gadget, as the uncool Harbormaster). Of course, no beach party movie is complete without a ridiculous surf battle.

The beach punks, now headed by Bobby, challenge the beach party crew to a surf contest. (Also, did Bobby inspire Bud Bundy's Grandmaster B persona in *Married With Children*, since no one takes him seriously?), The loser of this little contest has to leave the beach. Naturally, Frankie gets his surfing groove back and saves the day. Even Bobby has newfound respect for his old man.

We picked *Back the Beach* for this issue fully expecting to riff the hell out of the movie, but it's actually a nicely done little comedy. It's not too campy or too corny (and this thing had plenty of boomer cameos including Gilligan, the surviving Cleavers, Dick Dale, and even OJ Simpson (awwwwwkward...). Supposedly, 17 writers contributed to their script [5], which usually spells trouble. Whoever it was, they did their

homework when it comes to the beach party movies. Fans of the genre are treated to plenty of inside jokes.

We especially love the story itself. The beach party kids grew up and turned into Midwest squares. Their daughter moved to Malibu and fell in love with a surfer while their son fell in with the classic rival beach gang. Frankie and Annette eventually find their way, bridging the gap between the new and old generation of beach rats and surfers. Maybe a little from Column A (youth) and a little from Column B (adulthood) ain't so bad after all?

*Back to the Beach* was Frankie Avalon's baby. He shopped the script around for years. Eventually Paramount picked it up, but since Orion Pictures owned the rights to the AIP catalog, they decided that the film parody the beach party genre and not just the movies in which Frankie and Annette appeared [6].

A sequel had been planned where the characters go on an African safari, but *Back to the Beach* was the last film Annette Funicello did. She had multiple sclerosis, and by the time she finished this film, her symptoms had worsened. Fortunately, she was able to join Frankie Avalon for a *Back to the Beach* stage tour before retiring.





## SOUND THE ALARM

# School Daze

by Janene Scelza & Matt Scelza

Picture it: the late 1980s. HBCU paraphernalia and Pan African symbolism like kufi hats and kente patterns are fashionable in black pop culture. Spike Lee follows his successful debut, *She's Gotta Have It*, with his first major studio film, *School Daze*, a busy musical comedy about student life at the fictional Mission College, a prestigious HBCU. In fact, *She's Gotta Have It* gave Lee the notoriety needed to make a bigger budget movie. *School Daze* is often credited as the rare glimpse into black college life, although *The Cosby Show* spin-off, *A Different World*, set at the fictional HBCU Hillman College, debuted on TV in 1987. They even share some of the same cast.

However, college life on display in *School Daze* is very limited. There are no classroom scenes. All of the action takes place over Homecoming weekend as a feud between students ala *West Side Story* comes to a head. Several feuds, really. Setting the film at an HBCU gave Spike Lee, who wrote and directed the film, an unfettered opportunity to explore a lot of issues surrounding post-King black identity. Mission College's mission is "uplift the race," but what does this mean, particularly to younger black Americans who are, in this film, a generation out from the height of the Civil Rights movement?

*School Daze* tackles a hell of a lot of interesting issues, like social and economic mobility within the black community, obligations to the diaspora, toxic masculinity, complexion bias, lack of alumni support for HBCUs, youth activism, and more. Spike Lee said at a 30th anniversary screening of the film that *School Daze* was all of his experiences at his under-

grad Alma mater, Morehouse College, crammed into a single weekend [1]). As Roger Ebert noted in his 1988 review, the characters feel as if they are speaking to each other without concern for a hypothetical white audience. It's a candid conversation rarely had in American film and television, even now, and for us, two white viewers, it's a refreshing perspective.

As a musical, it's just as interesting. Lee gives us silky jazz numbers, doo wop, and a Busby Berkley style musical number – perhaps the film's best known musical performance besides the DC-based go-go band EU's club style performance of "Da Butt." In the aforementioned 30th anniversary screening, Spike Lee encouraged viewers familiar with *School Daze* to interact with the film in a way similar to what fans do with *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The surreal presentation lends well to that.





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There is A LOT going on in *School Daze*. Laurence Fishburne stars as Dap, the stereotypical “black-tivist” – head to toe in militant/Pan African garb throughout the film. When the film opens, he is leading a sparse student protest against Mission College, calling on the college administration to follow suit with predominantly white Ivy League schools and sever its financial ties with apartheid South Africa.

It seems like an easy moral choice, but President McPherson (Joe Seneca) worries about upsetting the school’s limited donors. This, in turn, becomes a discussion between the college admin about why HBCUs don’t get the same alumni support as other schools.

Dap’s friends – including Dwayne Wayne! (Kadeem Hardison) – collectively known as The Fellas, also start to wane in their support for Dap’s cause. As first generation college kids from working class families, they don’t want to jeopardize their academic careers

(and thus, chances for social mobility) when President McPherson starts threatening academic repercussions after they fight with the Gammas during the Homecoming parade.

The conversation gets more teeth in a scene at a KFC where some locals led by Samuel L. Jackson antagonize Dap and his friends. They are clearly bitter about the intrusion of college students/graduates in the local economy, and their prospect of their moving into a black middle class, thus taking those opportunities from those who were “born here, live here, and going to die here.”



The confrontation fizzles after one of The Fellas tells Jackson’s crew loud and clear, “You’re not niggers!” But, later on, it prompts one of Dap’s friends to question whether those same guys tried to better their lives and failed. And, if so, would it happen to these young men, too?

The major rivalry, however, is between Dap and Julian (Giancarlo Esposito), aka “Big Brother Almighty,” the unflinching head of the elite, hypermasculine Gamma Phi Gamma fraternity. Dap pledged to be a Gamma but was not accepted. Now, Dap’s naive cousin, Half-Pint, played by Spike Lee, spends Homecoming weekend eagerly enduring demeaning hazing exercises, desperate to become a Gamma.

Julian sniffs out Half-Pint’s lack of sexual experience and tells him virgins can’t be Gammas. Half-Pint tries to resolve this on his own, but later in the film, Julian offers up his own girlfriend, Jane (Tisha Campbell), and then dumps her afterwards when she admits that she slept with Half Pint. Ugh... *Flames. Flames! Flames...on the side of our faces,*

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*breathing, breathless, heaving breaths...*

So, Julian is a shit. Everyone knows Julian is a shit (Lee seems to draw comparisons to slave driver imagery later in the film). Unfortunately, Julian's awfulness overshadows his rather understandable response to Dap's anti-apartheid campaign, which Julian dismisses as "African mumbo-jumbo." For him, there is no responsibility to Africa. "We are all black Americans. You do not know a goddamn thing about Africa," he tells Dap. "I am from Detroit... Motown!"

Meanwhile, a similar conflict is brewing between the women on campus. Jane and the Gamma Rays are light-skinned women with relaxed hair while Dap's girlfriend, Rachel (Kyme), and her friends are dark-skinned with natural hair. Jane and the Gamma Rays are criticized for a perceived artificiality, while Rachel and her friends are criticized as old fashioned and thus, undesirable. (Again, Lee looks at this struggle between old world and new world identity). This rivalry culminates in the aforementioned memorable Busby Berkeley/Jets vs. Sharks musical number, "Straight and Nappy." (Technical enthusiasts: check out American Cinematographer Magazine's excellent interview with *School Daze* cinematographer Ernest Dickerson [3]).

*School Daze* has been criticized for being both an "overstuffed film," as well as one that failed to resolve much of its various plotlines. Indeed, there is a lot going on in almost every way: narratively, musically, and visually. It is such a unique film in that regard. To the criticism about narrative loose ends: these characters represent complicated questions about what is essentially generation in transition – it's impossible to draw a conclusion one way or another. That doesn't appear to be Spike Lee's intention, anyways. Unfortunately, the finale is abrupt and heavy-handed, Dap and Julian ring a bell and break the

fourth wall to inform their black audience to "Wake up!" (Get woke?)

In the 30th Anniversary, Spike Lee was asked whether there were plans to reunite the *School Daze* cast for a Netflix special, similar to the way *She's Gotta Have It* was revived as a two-season TV series. He announced that *School Daze* was actually headed to the stage, with plans to turn it into a Broadway Musical set 25 years after the film. The project had been in the works for a while. However, the last news about it surfaced in 2019.

We really enjoyed this film – it's definitely one worth revisiting nowadays. Also - it would be awesome if Lee got his wish for a *Rocky Horror* style interactive treatment from fans.

And on that note, we close our last essay for this issue with a confession: For two people who don't care much for musicals, we really enjoyed all the 80s musicals that we watched for this issue (*Popeye*, *Back to the Beach*, and *School Daze*). And that's the double truth, Ruth!





## UNDER THE SEA

# The Little Mermaid

by Stephanie McDevitt

*The Little Mermaid*, based on the Hans Christen Andersen tale of the same name, is generally regarded as the movie that started the Disney renaissance of animated films (although both *The Great Mouse Detective* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* were hits before *The Little Mermaid* was released). It was a huge blockbuster that made almost six times its original budget. With great animation (for the time) and catchy songs, *The Little Mermaid* was my gateway to falling in love with musicals.

Disney actually started working on *The Little Mermaid* in the 30s. It was supposed to be included in a series of vignettes of Andersen tales, but was delayed for a variety of rea-

sons. According to Wikipedia, the crew working on this movie in the 80s found the original development work done in the 30s, and coincidentally, the writers had made a lot of the same changes to the plot line [1].

In 1985, Ron Clements read the Andersen version of *The Little Mermaid* and pitched it to Disney bigwig Jeffery Katzenberg, who eventually approved the idea. In 1987, Howard Ashman joined the project, and John Musker, Clements, Ashman, and Katzenberg changed the story to mirror a traditional Broadway musical. Ashman (credited with making Sebastian the crab Jamaican and shifting the musical style to reflect that) teamed up with composer Alan Menken to write the score (both men worked on *Little Shop of Horrors*). By 1988, *The Little Mermaid* was expected to be Disney's next big animated release [2].

In addition to bringing the Caribbean music vibe to this movie, Howard Ashman also told Jodi Benson about the audition for Ariel.

The two of them had worked together on the Broadway show *Smile*, and Asman thought she would be perfect for the part. Benson won the role in 1988, and it transformed her career. Previously, she had only been a stage actress, but this movie launched her into film and TV voice acting. When I was in high school, I saw Benson in her Tony-nominated role in *Crazy For You*, and as I recall, she was delightful [3].

Casting for other roles in this movie did not prove to be as easy. Clements and Musker originally wrote Ursula the Sea Witch with Bea Arthur in mind. However,





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Arthur turned down the role and actresses such as Nancy Wilson, Roseanne, Charlotte Rae, and Elaine Stritch were considered. Stritch got the part but clashed with Howard Ashman's style of music production and was replaced by Pat Carroll. While I'm sure both Arthur and Stritch would have been great, Pat Carroll's Ursula is iconic (the animated version of Ursula was apparently inspired by Divine, who is also iconic) [4].

Disney threw a ton of money into making this movie. During production, they opened a satellite animation studio in Florida, which contributed to *The Little Mermaid's* ink and paint support. They hired live actors (Sherri Lynn Stoner and Joshua Finkle) to act out scenes between Ariel and Eric for reference. The underwater scenes called for the most special effects in a Disney animated movie since *Fantasia* and required so much manpower they contracted with Pacific Rim Productions, a production company in China [5].

All of this money and hard work resulted in a very charming, very successful animated feature. In case you aren't familiar with *The Little Mermaid*, the story follows Ariel (Jodi Benson), a 16-year-old mermaid who is obsessed with the human world. She's so obsessed, she wants to become human. Unfortunately, her father, King Triton (Kenneth Mars), thinks Ariel needs to focus on her life in the ocean. When he finds out she's popping to the surface to speak to her seagull friend Skuttle (Buddy Hackett), he gets very angry and instructs his advisor, Sebastian the crab (Samuel E. Wright), to follow Ariel around.

Sebastian tries to convince Ariel to enjoy her life under water, but one night Ariel is drawn to the surface by some fireworks coming from a ship. On that ship is Prince Eric (Christopher Daniel Barnes), a handsome bachelor

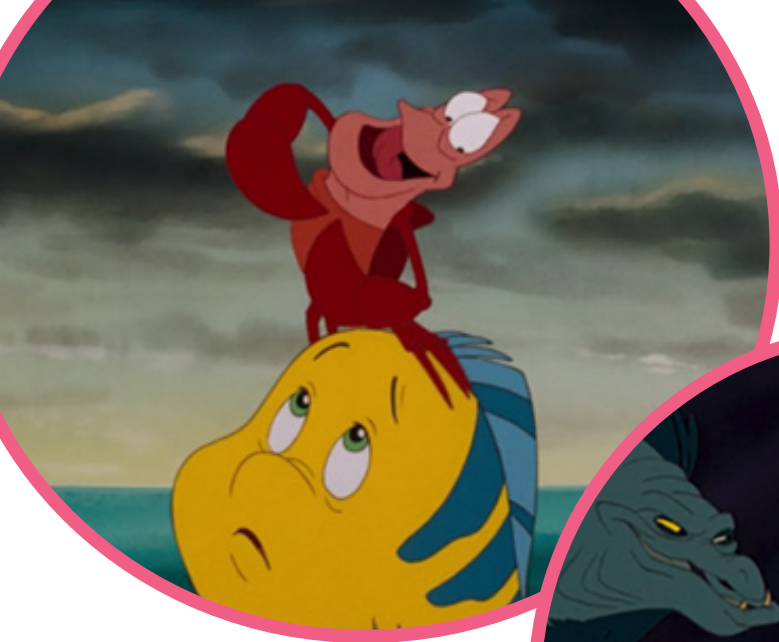


who immediately catches Ariel's eye. When a sudden storm hits, Eric is thrown into the sea. Ariel saves him, dragging him to shore. As Eric comes to, he gets a glimpse of Ariel's face and, more importantly, hears her singing. He's intrigued and Ariel is head over heels in love.



Unfortunately, Sebastian tells King Triton about Ariel's and Eric's encounter, and Triton loses his mind. Ariel, so upset at her father, decides to take matters into her own hands and visits Ursula the evil Sea Witch. Ursula says she will help Ariel become human so she can be with Eric, but there is a catch (actually, there are a few catches). First, Ariel will only have three days on land to get Eric to kiss her. If they don't kiss by sun down on the third day, Ariel will be transformed back into a mermaid and belong to Ursula. Also, Ariel will have to do all of this without talking because

## Girls, on Film



Ursula takes her voice. So, the rest of the movie plays out with Ariel trying to woo Eric, Eric trying to figure out who this girl is, Ursula maneuvering to enslave Ariel, and Sebastian trying to make sure Ariel is safe. It's a Disney movie, so it has a happy ending, unlike the Anderson story from which it came. The reviews of the movie were overwhelmingly positive. Roger Ebert loved it, and he especially loved that Ariel was an independent female character (unlike earlier Disney princesses). He said, "Ariel is a fully realized female character who thinks and acts independently, even rebelliously, instead of hanging around passively while the fates decide her destiny" [6].

While I agree that Ariel has more agency than, say, *Sleeping Beauty*, she's only a teenager. We learn early on in the movie that she is 16. So, like most teenagers, she makes rash decisions and often acts impulsively. She gets herself in such a pickle that all the men around her (and aside from Ursula, the majority of the characters are male) are trying to save her. Sebastian, Triton, and Eric all risk their lives to keep her safe. So while she does make her own decisions, they are very bad decisions.

Speaking of which (spoiler alert), the movie



ends with Ariel and Eric's wedding. Again, she's 16. Why does Triton let his underage daughter leave her entire world behind to marry a grown man? I assume if Triton can turn Ariel into a human then he can also turn Eric into a merman. Why does Ariel have to change everything about herself and leave her home and family to go be with this guy she only met a few days ago? And I know Ariel wants to be human, and Triton knows he has to let her live her own life, but couldn't it have waited until she was a bit older?

Furthermore, I don't love the messaging about changing who you are to be with a guy. But, in the 80s (and pretty much in all times) the messaging to young girls via pop culture and media was (is) far more messed up, so in historical context *The Little Mermaid* doesn't look so bad. And it made a ton of money, won a bunch of awards, and spawned several remakes, including a live-action version that's supposed to come out in 2023 (with Melissa McCarthy as Ursula). So, the story survives despite my criticisms.

I absolutely loved *The Little Mermaid* as a kid. I'm sure I wore out the cassette tape of the soundtrack. I think this movie holds up, but I also think Disney has released more recent movies with better female characters. However, Ariel had to walk before the other Disney Princesses could sing, so it's worth checking out.

# Endnotes

## The Chaotic Guide to Chaos: The Great Rock and Roll Swindle

Release date: May 15, 1980  
Written and directed by: Julien Temple  
Essay by: Dr. Rhonda Baughman

[1] Difficult to catch them all, but some of the more memorable lessons include 'naming the band'; 'how to sell the swindle'; 'anger the audience as much as possible'; 'play anywhere'; 'create generation gaps'; 'become the world's greatest tourist attraction'; 'capture the imagination of the entire world' ... and many, many more.

[2] As much as I enjoyed the original punk movement and music scene of the mid-late 70s and early 80s, my wayward youth was in the mid-90s, another punk wave of underground local shows, the Pacific NW's alternative music gifts, the Riot Grrl scene, and of course, I share a hometown with Marilyn Manson.

[3] The Sex Pistols formed from The Strand, aka The Swankers, which began in London, 1972. Guitarist Steve Jones asked McLaren to be manager in 1974 and with much diddling, traveling, name changes, and stories, McLaren did manage the Pistols' brief career. Notorious frontman John Lydon (aka Johnny Rotten) would join the band in 1975. Although much of the band's lyrics came from Lydon and the musical arrangement from Matlock, all members shared equally in credit. (<https://tinyurl.com/2p8tfrbk>)

[4] Somehow, in the band's brief run, McLaren did manage have the band sign to at least four labels.

[5] I picked up my first cd copy at a truck stop and played it until it scratched and skipped.

[6] I recommend listening to Swindle's soundtrack over watching the film frankly.

[7] Great Rock and Roll Swindle (Wikipedia), <https://tinyurl.com/464e3hr8>

[8] John Lyndon Quotes (Brainyquote), <https://tinyurl.com/2p8zyf78>

[9] Billy Joel - "You May Be Right" (Glass Houses, 1980), <https://tinyurl.com/2p8tfrbk>

## It Yis What It Yis: Popeye

Release date: December 6, 1980  
Written by: Jules Feiffer  
Directed by: Robert Altman  
Essay by: Janene Scelza and Matt Scelza

[1] "An Interview with Jules Feiffer" (Screen Slate, 2019), <https://tinyurl.com/2p8cn3ms>

[2] "Swee'Pea" (Popeye the Sailorpedia), <https://tinyurl.com/3vm7yn7k>

[3] Popeye IMDB Trivia, <https://tinyurl.com/arx8244u>

[4] "How Robert Altman turned Popeye into an Altman movie" (The Dissolve, 2014), <https://tinyurl.com/5fhyk3ac>

[5] Ibid.

[6] Popeye Village, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9hh9ax>

[7] "How Robert Altman turned Popeye into an Altman movie" (The Dissolve, 2014), <https://tinyurl.com/5fhyk3ac>

## The Sun'll Come Out: Annie

Release Date: May 21, 1982  
Written by: Carol Sobieski  
Directed by: John Huston  
Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

[1] Annie (1982 film). Wikipedia, <https://tinyurl.com/5fwesppx>

[2] "Annie [1982]" (Basement Rejects, 2014), <https://tinyurl.com/5ej2t6wt>

[3] "15 Hard-Knock Facts About Annie" (Mental Floss, 2017), <https://tinyurl.com/mthy9zhx>

[4] "Annie [1982]" (Basement Rejects, 2014), <https://tinyurl.com/5ej2t6wt>

[5] "15 Hard-Knock Facts About Annie" (Mental Floss, 2017), <https://tinyurl.com/mthy9zhx>



# Endnotes (Cont'd)

[6] Annie (1982 film). Wikipedia,  
<https://tinyurl.com/5fwesppx>

[7] "15 Hard-Knock Facts About Annie" (Mental Floss, 2017),  
<https://tinyurl.com/mthy9zhx>

[8] "10 Fun Facts You Never Knew About 1982's Annie!" (80s Kids, 2019),  
<https://tinyurl.com/2p99axt9>

[9] Annie (1982 film). Wikipedia.  
<https://tinyurl.com/5fwesppx>  
[10] Ibid.

[11] Therese Oneill. "15 Hard-Knock Facts About Annie." Mental Floss. 18 June 2017.  
<https://tinyurl.com/mthy9zhx>

[12] Annie (1982 film). Wikipedia,  
<https://tinyurl.com/5fwesppx>

## Enter at Your Own Risk: Forbidden Zone

Release Date: March 21, 1982  
Written by: Richard Elfman  
Directed By: Richard Elfman  
Essay by: Dr. Rhonda Baughman

[1] *Forbidden Zone* was shot 1977-78, released 1980, and distributed 1982; then, mostly forgotten for two decades.

[2] Not as much has been written about Bright, although this might be enough for some: <https://tinyurl.com/2p8a9m83> and Sweet Susan – of course, many things have been written, but few, I find, do this artistic warrior justice.

[3] Positive and negative ripples – this film influenced and inspired many, but as you'll read later, Zone has some issues associated with it, too.

[4] As a young journalist, I studied Tyrrell's films hoping to interview her. However, she became seriously ill, endured a double leg amputation below the knee, and passed away in 2012 before I could contact her.

[5] Broadway debut in 1965 for *Cactus Flower*; film debut in 1971's *Shoot Out*; Academy Award

nomination for *Fat City* (1972), for only a few examples.

[6] I wish we'd been gifted with a full Susan Tyrrell autobiography. If even one live performance of her one-woman show *My Rotten Life: A Bitter Operetta* (1990) would be released in full, I'd accept this substitution! Two links for this show, channeling some ferocious pain: *Here's to Life* (<https://tinyurl.com/3h4vh4fy>) and *Burnin' Star* (<https://tinyurl.com/yuh98dm5>)

[7] Intentional or not, apparently *Forbidden Zone* opened to negative criticism but found success as a midnight movie and later, a cult classic. Richard Elfman indicated the film bankrupted him, caused him to lose his house, even though only one actor opted in for a paycheck; he also revealed he, personally, had some issues with the less-than-PC scenes of animated blackface, and was grateful he could release a new cut replacing it. Elements of racism, homophobia, and antisemitism also surround a few scenes and are difficult to watch. The teacher letting loose with an AR in the classroom didn't sit well with me either. Richard declared intention for a sequel, his "bucket list" film (from his now-closed IndieGoGo campaign).

[8] The IMDB one sentence synopsis barely tries: *The bizarre and musical tale of a girl who travels to another dimension through the gateway found in her family's basement.* (<https://tinyurl.com/354nb677>)

[9] Same name of the current IG account featuring Susan Tyrrell photos.

[10] *Far From Home* (1989) and *The Demolitionist* (1995)

[11] The World is Wrong Podcast - "Episode 050: September 30, 1955 (1977)",  
<https://tinyurl.com/2p9dmnpd>

[12] Once verified, I knew there was no returning to surface coverage (like a well-meaning [IMDB.com](https://www.imdb.com) bio, adjective-blitzing blog sites oozing love of Tyrrell's work, or facile reviews of Tyrrell's performance in Zone or any other movie) knowing what I knew now. (<https://tinyurl.com/yc89pz3h>)

[13] Brief interview only a few years before her death: Susan says she preferred art to movies because she could control everything.

# Endnotes (Cont'd)

(<https://tinyurl.com/bdhyv6wy>)

## Together Again: The Muppets Take Manhattan

Release Date: July 13, 1984

Written by: Frank Oz, Tom Patchett, and Jay Tarses

Directed by: Frank Oz

Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

[1] The Muppets Take Manhattan. Wikipedia.  
<https://tinyurl.com/2s4dchyv>

[2] "13 Facts About The Muppets Take Manhattan" (Mental Floss, 2019), <https://tinyurl.com/yckr6nu6>

[3] The Muppets Take Manhattan. Wikipedia.  
<https://tinyurl.com/2s4dchyv>

[4] "Pigs don't have eyebrows: The Muppets Take Manhattan" (*Tor.com*, 2011),  
<https://tinyurl.com/5ydbwkez>

[5] Ibid.

[6] "A Q&A with Muppet Writer David Misch" (ToughPigs, 2011), <https://tinyurl.com/32mnkr8x>

[7] Ibid.

[8] "Muppet Babies (1984 TV Series)" (Wikipedia),  
<https://tinyurl.com/2p973hz3>

[9] "The Muppets Take Manhattan" (Wikipedia),  
<https://tinyurl.com/2s4dchyv>

[10] "Kermit the Frog on Why It's Not That Easy Being Green in the Emerald City" (Theater Mania, 2018),  
<https://tinyurl.com/579fzaxf>

## How Frankie and Annette Got Their Groove Back: Back to the Beach

Release date: August 7, 1987

Written by: Peter Krikes, Steve Meerson, and Christopher Thompson

Directed by: Lyndall Hobbs

Essay by: Janene Scelza and Matt Scelza

[1] "American International Pictures" (Wikipedia),

<https://tinyurl.com/23spr2va>

[2] Ibid.

[3] "The Silly, if Delusional, Charm of the Beach Party Genre," (*Vulture*, 2012), <https://tinyurl.com/yc7ad3pv>

[4] [VIDEO] "The Beach Party Genre" (The Royal Ocean Film Society, 2018), <https://tinyurl.com/5n7fa3f8>

[5] "Remembering Back to the Beach, the Beach Party Movie's Last Hurrah" (*Vanity Fair*, 2017),  
<https://tinyurl.com/2dujkn2j>

[6] Ibid.

## Alarm Bells are Ringing: School Daze

Release date: February 12, 1988

Directed by: Spike Lee

Written by: Spike Lee

Essay by: Janene Scelza and Matt Scelza

[1] [VIDEO] "Spike Lee talks about "School Daze" ahead of the film's 30th anniversary" (*Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 2019), <https://tinyurl.com/2edye9yu>

[2] Roger Ebert's School Daze review (1988),  
<https://tinyurl.com/2fnajmc7>

## Under the Sea: The Little Mermaid

Release Date: November 17, 1989

Written and directed by: Ron Clements and John Musker

Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

[1] "The Little Mermaid (1989 Film)" (Wikipedia),  
<https://tinyurl.com/s3pbhm7j>

[2] Ibid.

[3] "Jodi Benson" (Wikipedia),  
<https://tinyurl.com/yckhemju>

[4] "The Little Mermaid (1989 Film)" (Wikipedia),  
<https://tinyurl.com/s3pbhm7j>

[5] Ibid.

[6] Roger Ebert's review of The Little Mermaid Ebert (1989), <https://tinyurl.com/2uukbaj9>

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