

The Girl Can't Help It



The Girl Can't Help It grossed over \$6 million and had a profound influence on youth culture



IN IN LIVING COLOUR

It's the movie that brought us our favourite 50s rock'n'rollers in glorious full colour. Now, 65 years on from its release, we look back at the legacy of Frank Tashlin's *The Girl Can't Help It*.

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

Look up Eddie Cochran or Gene Vincent on YouTube and you'll find a miserably short list of foggy monochrome TV recordings that make these two icons of the 1950s seem as historically distant as Charlie Chaplin or Edward VII. But type in 'Eddie Cochran' and 'The Girl Can't Help It' and there the late rocker is, in full glorious colour and in high-definition, as vivid and alive as he was in 1956.

Thank the maker, then, for *The Girl Can't Help It*. Frank Tashlin's movie may not have won rapturous write-ups at the time, but, 65 years on from its release, this cult rock'n'roll comedy is now rightly celebrated as a classic of its genre – and a cherishable record of a precious time in pop culture.

"It's still *the* great music film," Paul McCartney once enthused. "They had only treated music films as B-pictures up till then, or used the music just as a theme tune, as in *Blackboard Jungle*. Or those little black and white productions with Alan Freed as the personality, and lots of what they thought were

'Black acts'... We idolised these people and always thought they were given crummy treatment – until *The Girl Can't Help It*."

While grown-up critics may have savaged the movie on its release, it was passionately embraced by the younger set, hungry as they were to see the culture they were living up there on the big screen. Sure, there'd been rock'n'roll flicks before *The Girl Can't Help It*, but never before had so many of the era's starriest names been collected together in just one film, and in colour, too. When actor Tom Ewell appears at the beginning of the movie, it's in black and white and in the old 4.3 television ratio. "Ladies and gentlemen," he announces, "this motion picture was photographed in the grandeur of Cinescope," he continues, before looking around and then flicking left and right as the picture opens out into widescreen. "And with gorgeous life-like colour by De Luxe," he adds, as the monochrome screen suddenly floods with oranges and blues. According to McCartney, who saw the film when he was just 14, that opening sequence was "the most fantastic trick ever".

Much has been made over the years of this movie's importance in the story of The Beatles. It's said it inspired John Lennon to pick up his first guitar and that it was Macca's approximation of Eddie Cochran's performance of *Twenty Flight Rock* from the film that sealed his place in The Quarrymen. It was clearly a movie that was so critical to the Fabs that, on 18 September 1968, ➔

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**FAST
FILM
FACTS**

1 The wedding dress that Jayne Mansfield wears at the end of the film was, two years later, loaned to her to use on her real-life wedding day with body-builder Mickey Hargitay.

2 Two uncredited songwriters on *The Girl Can't Help It*, Hugo Friedhofer and Lionel Newman (father of film composer Thomas Newman), also wrote music for the Elvis Presley movie, *Love Me Tender*, released in 1956.

3 When Abbey Lincoln is performing *Spread The Word* in the nightclub scene with Jayne Mansfield and Tom Ewell, she's wearing a costume worn by Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* three years before. Another costume from that film appears later, when Ewell passes a chorus girl on the stairs. She's wearing the dress Jane Russell wore when she sang *Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend*.

they purposely rescheduled the recording of *Birthday* from *The White Album* simply so they could watch the British TV premiere of *The Girl Can't Help It*. As Beatles historian Mark Lewisohn wrote: "It is impossible to overestimate the impact made by *The Girl Can't Help It* on Liverpool teenagers."

McCartney had a point when he suggested that, before *The Girl Can't Help It*, the big screen's flirtation with the emerging rock'n'roll scene was either half-hearted, patronising or exploitative. There's none of that in Frank Tashlin's picture. Rock'n'roll is woven into the very fabric of the movie, and even the older characters are in thrall to this musical revolution. "Okay, so Jerri can't sing," says the fortysomething 'Fats' Murdock after showing his apparently tone-deaf girlfriend a clip of Eddie Cochran on TV. "Well that guy ain't got a trained voice either and he's one of the top record stars in the country. Why? Cos he's got a new sound!"

The movie showcases many of the biggest and buzziest recording names of the time, including Little Richard, Gene Vincent And His Blue Caps, Fats Domino, The Platters, The Treniers and Eddie Fontaine. And,



Gene Vincent And His Blue Caps on the set

THE BEATLES RESCHEDULED THE RECORDING OF BIRTHDAY SIMPLY SO THEY COULD WATCH THE BRITISH TV PREMIERE OF THE GIRL CAN'T HELP IT

Buddy Adler erred. Parker made them an offer – he would flip a coin. Heads, Fox gets Elvis for free and a third song; tails, Fox coughs up £100,000. Adler declined the offer.

One person who believed Fox had made a mistake in not agreeing to Parker's demands was the film's star Jayne Mansfield. It can't be underestimated how crucial the 23-year-old actress was to the success of *The Girl Can't Help It*. Unfairly maligned as a kind of poundshop Marilyn Monroe, Mansfield had made a name for herself on Broadway the year before with the satirical play *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* Beyond her obvious assets ("Jayne Mansfield and her cantilevered cleavage – what more do young teenagers want?" recalled a still lust-struck Paul McCartney many years later), the actress brings effortless warmth to the role of Jerri, whose dreams of domestic bliss are cruelly ignored by her Svengali boyfriend whose only ambition is to make her into a star, despite her apparent lack of any talent. The film has fun with the paralysing

generally speaking, they're not relegated to the background either. There are no teasings of tracks in *The Girl Can't Help It*. If you were a fan of Little Richard's *Ready Teddy* or Fats Domino's *Blue Monday*, you were getting almost the full song in this film, which, at a time when TV appearances from Black artists were rare, makes *The Girl Can't Help It* one of the most culturally valuable movies of the 1950s.

Of course, one stellar name is conspicuous by his absence. Fox certainly wanted Elvis Presley for the picture, but Colonel Tom Parker demanded £50,000 for his boy to sing two songs. The studio's Head Of Production



Little Richard belting out his performance of *Ready Teddy*

4 Along with 1957's *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*, this was the first of two comedies that Frank Tashlin directed which headlined Jayne Mansfield. He's quoted as saying: "There's nothing in the world to me that's funnier than big breasts".

5 When Jerri performs with her own singing voice at the end of the picture, it's really singer Eileen Wilson that we're hearing. She also dubbed Ava Gardner in the films *One Touch Of Venus* and *The Hucksters* and Barbara Bel Geddes in *The Five Pennies*.

6 One surprise fan of the movie is German arthouse director Wim Wenders. He told *Film Comment* magazine in 1992: "This is my definitive guilty pleasure. It's actually a terribly stupid movie, with a story you would shudder to tell, Jayne Mansfield is such a non-actress; she's just a ploy, pretext or gimmick to get you from one rock'n'roll event to another. But you get to see Gene Vincent, Little Richard, Eddie Cochran – these unbelievable musicians who don't exist on 35mm otherwise."

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THE BEST OF THE BEST

Five of the most sizzling performances from the movie...

READY TEDDY
LITTLE RICHARD



Standing at the piano, an impossibly youthful Little Richard belts out this rock'n'roll standard that can be found as the B-side to his 1956 hit *Rip It Up*.

CRY ME A RIVER
JULIE LONDON

Julie London had her big break in the movie, starring as the singer that slipped through Tom Miller's fingers. Originally written in the early 50s for Ella Fitzgerald for the film *Pete Kelly's Blues*, *Cry Me A River* was eventually recorded by London in 1955.

BE-BOP-A-LULA
GENE VINCENT AND HIS BLUE CAPS

Gene Vincent gives it his all in this electrifying performance of his signature hit. It had been released just six months previously, reaching No.7 on the Billboard chart.



TWENTY FLIGHT ROCK
EDDIE COCHRAN

Eddie was just 18 when he delivered this much-imitated performance of his classic track. With his shoulders hunched and a little too much makeup on his face, he bashes away at his Gretsch G6120, giving us a movie clip that would go down in history.

BLUE MONDAY
FATS DOMINO

Like all the songs here, *Blue Monday* was a recent release for Fats Domino when he performed it for *The Girl Can't Help It*. It was one of the earliest R&B songs to make the Billboard chart, peaking at No.5 and reaching No.1 on the R&B Best Sellers chart.



The Girl Can't Help It played a pivotal role in Jayne Mansfield's movie career

effect Mansfield's beauty had on men. Tashlin's background as a *Looney Tunes* animator is clearly on show with moments like that when a man's glasses crack as she shimmies up the stairs and when a lovestruck milkman's bottle overflows as she passes, in a lewd visual joke that might have been considered too on-the-nose even for the Carry Ons.

It's fascinating how prescient much of *The Girl Can't Help It* seems now, in an age where the pursuit of celebrity more than ever has little to do with talent or achievement. When Murdock asks agent Tom Miller to make Jerri into a star, he's tasked with simply showing her off around town, telling her, "Don't say

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Mansfield with Edmond O'Brien and Tom Ewell

anything, just say, 'Ask my agent'." It's only later that Miller discovers quite how little talent his new project has. Visiting a rehearsal studio, he sets out to ascertain how good a singer she is. Alarming, her voice is so wretched it shatters lightbulbs.

Jerri's lack of vocal prowess doesn't deter Murdock, however, and he digs out a song he penned in the joint, *Rock Around The Rockpile*. Jerri's job on the track is to deliver the sound of a prison siren, and when it's completed he asks Miller to tout it around.

Taking the record to Chicago in an attempt to get it on the country's jukeboxes, Miller soon discovers that the person he's talking to, jukebox king Wheeler, is an old rival of Murdock's, who refuses to playlist the song. Undeterred, Murdock simply muscles in on Wheeler's business, replacing his old adversary's jukeboxes with his own.

And what do you know, the song becomes a giant hit and the film climaxes with Jerri taking to the stage at the Rock And Roll Jubilee and revealing a dazzlingly beautiful singing voice. "I always could sing," Jerri confesses to Miller afterwards. "I thought if I was real awful, I'd get out of owing him."

Against a budget of \$1,310,000, *The Girl Can't Help It* went on to gross \$6,250,000 – considerably more than any rock'n'roll movie before it, including *Rock Around The Clock*, which had premiered nine months earlier. Its influence was profound. It's clear that director Richard Thorpe was watching, because the iconic *Jailhouse Rock* sequence from the film of the same name – released one year later – has striking similarities to the *Rock Around The Rockpile* finale of *The Girl Can't Help It*. And, as Mark Lewisohn pointed out, it can't be overstated quite how seismic the movie was for young people in the 50s. Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck, both later of The Yardbirds, have spoken of their love of *The Girl Can't Help It*, with Beck calling it "the best rock'n'roll movie ever filmed".

The film also made Jayne Mansfield a bona fide star and one of the most enduring sex symbols of the 20th century. She brings real heart and a touching sweetness to the role of Jerri, and often acts her more seasoned co-stars off the screen.

But, above all, it's for its music that *The Girl Can't Help It* is remembered. In 1956, it brought rock'n'roll's most exciting names to the attention of millions. It delivered the thrills, the glamour and the voltage of American music right into the laps of rock-thirsty British teens. And 65 years on, it's a pristine, 35mm snapshot of one of the most important years in rock'n'roll history. The adults might have sneered at *The Girl Can't Help It* in 1956, but, as ever, what did they know? *

THE PLAYERS



JAYNE MANSFIELD (JERRI JORDAN)

Born in Pennsylvania in 1933, Jayne Mansfield first made a splash as one of *Playboy* magazine's Playmates Of The Month. After starring in the stage production of *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* in 1955, she was offered a six-year contract by Twentieth Century Fox. Her career declined in the 60s and she died in 1967 after a car crash.



TOM EWELL (TOM MILLER)

Most famous for his role opposite Marilyn Monroe in 1955's *The Seven Year Itch*, Ewell was more of a stage actor than a film one, though he continued to perform on the big and small screen until his retirement in 1986. He died in 1994 at the age of 85.



EDMOND O'BRIEN (FATS MURDOCK)

As a child, O'Brien put on magic shows for fellow kids in his neighbourhood after being taught by his neighbour, Harry Houdini. As a grown-up, Edmond would become one of the most reliable supporting actors of his generation, scooping an Oscar in 1955 for *The Barefoot Contessa*. He died in 1985.



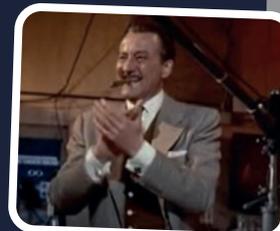
BARRY GORDON (BARRY THE PAPERBOY)

Just eight years old at the time of filming *The Girl Can't Help It*, Gordon (who almost steals the movie with the line, "If she's a girl, I don't know what my sister is!") later went on to become the longest-serving president (1988 to 1995) of the Screen Actors Guild. He also voiced Donatello in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* cartoons and is currently the host of Pasadena's talk news show, *NewsRap*.



RAY ANTHONY (HIMSELF)

Ray Anthony, who sings the single version of *Rock Around The Rockpile* in the movie, played in Glenn Miller's band from 1940-41 and as bandleader of The Ray Anthony Orchestra, enjoying hits in the early 50s with *The Bunny Hop*, *Hokey Pokey* and the theme from *Dragnet*. He celebrated his 99th birthday on 20 January.



JOHN EMERY (WHEELER)

Emery played Murdock's old slot machine rival Wheeler in the film. An actor since the 1930s, he also starred in movies such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) and 1948's *The Woman In White*. A former husband of Tallulah Bankhead, he died in 1964 shortly after completing his final film, *Youngblood Hawke*.