

Wild Rose and *Yesterday*: A Scottish singer seeks country music fame and a world without the Beatles

By Joanne Laurier
22 July 2019

Wild Rose, directed by Tom Harper, screenplay by Nicole Taylor; *Yesterday*, directed by Danny Boyle, written by Richard Curtis, based on an original screenplay by Jack Barth and Mackenzie Crook

Two recent British-made films delve into the field of popular music, with limited results. A considerable amount of talent was involved in the making of both *Wild Rose* and *Yesterday*, but neither movie breaks much new ground and each seems willing to pass on a conventional view of things.

This is unfortunate because popular music means a great deal to vast numbers of human beings in every part of the globe. A given tune or performance may be ephemeral, but collectively the effects of such music endure. Especially among the young, particular songs and singers often become associated with life's early turning points, and also under certain circumstances significant broader events, "punctuating" lives indelibly. Music can also hearten, inspire and arouse to action.

A film about such a subject, which may also rely on or highlight a beloved body of music, can be a means of getting at social life from an unusual and unorthodox point of view. *Wild Rose* and *Yesterday* each has its charms, but settle for too little. The films' themes—that celebrity is not all it's cracked up to be, that money doesn't buy happiness and that you can't run away from your responsibilities—are not earth-shaking.

Wild Rose

Directed by London-born Tom Harper (*War and Peace*, 2016), *Wild Rose* follows Rose-Lynn Harlan (played by fiery Irish actress/singer Jessie Buckley), a 23-year-old Glaswegian newly released from prison after serving time on a drug charge.

Fellow inmates wish her well as the "next Dolly Parton." An aspiring "country"—not "country and western"—singer as she insists, Rose cherishes the dream of performing at Nashville's famed Grand Ole Opry. Brightly red-headed in

grey surroundings, she sports white cowboy boots, flashy tops and has tattooed her forearm with the words, "Three chords and the truth," a phrase coined by country songwriter Harlan Howard as his definition of country music. When she is chided about her prison record, she spits back, "[Johnny] Cash was a convicted criminal."

Rose is shackled to an ankle monitor that keeps her housebound at night. Her emotional volatility derives from a tough Glaswegian working class background. The mother of two children under 10 years old, appropriately named Wynonna (Daisy Littlefield) and Lyle (Adam Mitchell) after country singers, Rose has up to now continuously failed the test of reliable parenthood.

Her disapproving mother Marion (the remarkable Julie Walters), a bakery employee, has been the children's primary care giver. After Rose picks a fight at a local bar where she used to perform, threatening her with new problems, she lands a job cleaning house in a palatial mansion. Its owner Susannah (Sophie Okonedo) quickly becomes a fan of the feisty singer hovering her home and of country music as a whole (Susannah falls especially for the sounds of pioneering female singing star Kitty Wells). The relationship between the unlikely pair provides the movie with some unexpected warmth. But Susannah's generous efforts to finance Rose's dream does not turn out to be the "yellow brick road" out of Scotland.

Buckley's genuine talents help propel *Wild Rose*. Throughout, she is an explosive artistic and human force. Buckley performs most of the songs in the movie, whose soundtrack features both original numbers and cover versions of songs by country and country-folk artists such as Emmylou Harris, Wynonna Judd, John Prine and Patty Griffin, along with indie Glasgow rock band Primal Scream.

Called on to carry and ground much of the movie, veteran actress Walters realistically conveys something crucial about the issues and conflicts that beset hard-pressed families like Marion's. Okonedo, on the other hand, seems almost too

good to be true.

Unfortunately, the obligatory and unconvincing “uplifting” element and ending in *Wild Rose* is a central problem. The opposite of that is certainly not pessimism, but complexity and a closer, richer look at life. Real life is not so simple as it is presented here and stars aren’t born in every poor household. What’s to become of those without one? Rose, somewhat self-centered and individualistic, may not care, but we do and the filmmakers ought to.

Working class life in Glasgow and cities like it, cities with long histories of bitter struggle and now suffering from terrible industrial decay, is potentially fascinating subject matter for drama. But it has to be treated more seriously, with more than glancing, essentially formulaic blows.

Country music, its performers and its audience comprise another promising, suggestive subject for art. Only a few films have even begun to explore it, including perhaps *Coal Miner’s Daughter* (1980, Michael Apted), *Tender Mercies* (1983, Bruce Beresford), *Sweet Dreams* (1985, Karel Reisz) and, in its own idiosyncratic, satirical way, Robert Altman’s *Nashville* (1975).

Wild Rose’s filmmakers put forward too many simplistic notions. Summing up the movie’s themes, screenwriter Nicole Taylor stressed “the notion of home” and “being true to your dreams versus taking responsibility.” There are genuine possibilities in the film, but when it comes to taking up its more important concerns, *Wild Rose* misses too much of the point.

Yesterday

Yesterday is directed by Danny Boyle (*Trainspotting*, *Slumdog Millionaire*) and written by Richard Curtis (*Love Actually*, *Notting Hill*).

Jack Malik (Himesh Patel) is a school teacher turned singer-songwriter in Suffolk, England, who performs before handfuls of people. His fellow school teacher-manager is Ellie (Lily James), Jack’s childhood friend. She has waited a long time for Jack to fall in love with her. (The outcome of their relationship is telegraphed from the film’s opening moments.)

During a global power blackout, Jack gets hit by a bus. He recovers to a world that has been wiped clean of the music of the Beatles. The legendary quartet has been erased from Google and their albums have vanished without a trace. In Jack’s post-recovery universe, the band has never existed. When he begins to sing their songs, he strikes a chord, first locally, then draws the attention of star performers such as Ed Sheeran (playing himself).

Sheeran realizes he is the Salieri to Jack’s Mozart, but nonetheless encourages the latter to turn the song “Hey Jude,” into “Hey Dude.” Jack is soon picked up by the

celebrity hunter and cold-blooded agent Debra Hammer (Kate McKinnon), who sets about refashioning Jack as a soulless creature suited to all the money-making opportunities in Los Angeles.

Yesterday has several amusing scenes, such as one in which Jack tries to play “Let It Be” for his distracted parents, incredulous that they are not gripped by the power of the song. This is only a small blip, however, in his generally meteoric rise as a rock star. The most energetic moment occurs when Jack launches his album on the rooftop of a towering hotel to a massive crowd. He performs “Help” with genuine desperation, crisis-ridden because of his lost love and the fact that he is passing himself off as the creator of the Beatles’ music. (Patel is in general a fine performer.)

Yesterday is somewhat unfocused. Curtis is a pleasant, clever enough writer when he is not being sentimental, with a certain ability to create comic-touching moments, but the overall argument is unclear. Is it meant as a criticism of the present music world—or what precisely? As a matter of fact, it’s not at all certain the tuneful Beatles would know massive or undisputed success in the current environment.

Director Boyle also promotes unnecessarily simplistic notions. He describes *Yesterday* as a “love story” about the Beatles’ music and also “a love story about an unrequited love,” Ellie’s for Jack. He notes that “the stardom that everybody inevitably dreams of at some point is moving him [Jack] further and further away from his real destination in life, which is Ellie.”

In a telling and tasteless sequence, Jack goes to visit an aging John Lennon, now living as a recluse in an isolated seaside house. Lennon (Robert Carlyle) is a sad sack who tells Jack: “I’ve fought the battles I wanted to fight.” The implication of the scene seems to be that Lennon would have been a happier man and certainly lived longer, if—like the filmmakers—he had never stuck his neck out and fought the establishment artistically and politically. A pretty miserable theme.

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