

Rhythm & Blues

By Steve Chagollan



► THE MUSIC BIOPIC IS a particularly distinctive genre. While so many of them track a similar rise/fall/redemption arc, it's not so much by design as historic record. Artists mirrored on the big screen like Gene Krupa, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Édith Piaf, Jim Morrison and Kurt Cobain all fell victim to the ravages of drink and drugs triggered by sudden fame and the itinerate musician's life. But not all these stories end tragically. The real-life protagonists of the films *Ray* (2004) and *Walk the Line* (2005) overcame their demons and went on to enjoy sustained and storied careers. Here are a few examples of some of the more successful variations of the form.

RAY

Taylor Hackford

Due to its B.O. success and awards season pedigree, *Ray* (2004) became the gold standard for the music biopic. The first time he heard Ray Charles, Hackford said he knew the singer/pianist "was a cut above," which is why he spent 13 years raising money for the film, which would earn him Academy and DGA Award nominations, and an Oscar for Jamie Foxx.



“What I liked about this band in particular was that they were all girls and looked real badass.”

—FLORIA SIGISMONDI

THE RUNAWAYS

Floria Sigismondi

Sigismondi, who hailed from music videos, approached *The Runaways* (2010) less as a biopic and more like a coming-of-age story “about these girls who were young and their bodies are changing.” She was also drawn to the band’s rawness, a quality she tried to capture by shooting on Super 16mm.



PHOTOS: (TOP) PHOTOFEEST; (BOTTOM) RIVER ROAD ENTERTAINMENT



STRAIGHT OUTTA COMPTON

F. Gary Gray

L.A. gangsta rappers N.W.A. would be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame roughly four months after *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) proved a surprise hit, eventually grossing north of \$200 million worldwide. For Gray, though, the story was personal. “I grew up in that environment, in that era, experienced some of the things that you see on the screen,” he said. “We just focused on making it authentic.”



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BIRD

Clint Eastwood

A lifelong jazz fan, Eastwood has played a producing role on documentaries about such seminal figures as Thelonious Monk and Dave Brubeck. So it’s not a cliché to reference *Bird* (1988) as the director’s “passion project” about a subject, Charlie Parker, who was near and dear. “I was exposed to jazz early,” said Eastwood, “because it’s given me optimism that we can all hang together.”



PHOTOS: (TOP TO BOTTOM) EVERETT; PHOTOFEEST (2)

THE DOORS

Oliver Stone

This 1991 release—centering on the Doors' shambolic, Dionysian front man, Jim Morrison—ratchets up the “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll” mantra to a fever pitch. Stone was attracted to Morrison’s “questing” nature: “He was writing music about sex and life and death and Eros and fear,” said Stone. “Life is a game with a closed circle, and death is at the center. He was out there.”



“Jim Morrison was a *poète maudit* of my generation. He was ignored by many people. And the music spoke eloquently to me, moved me.”

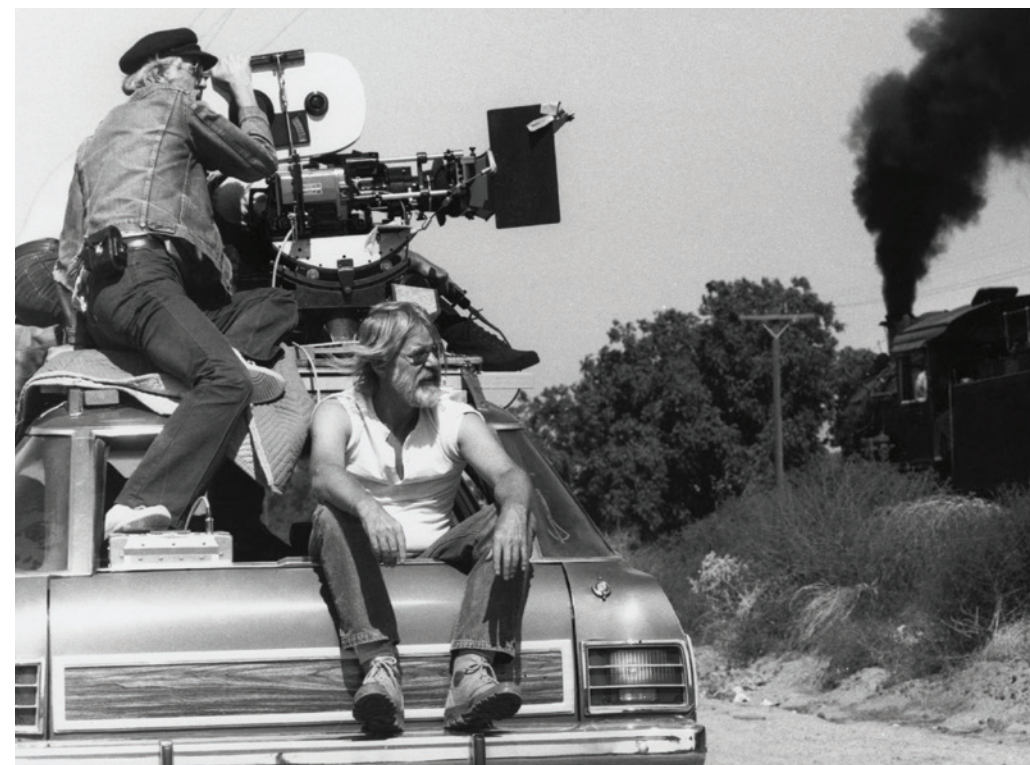
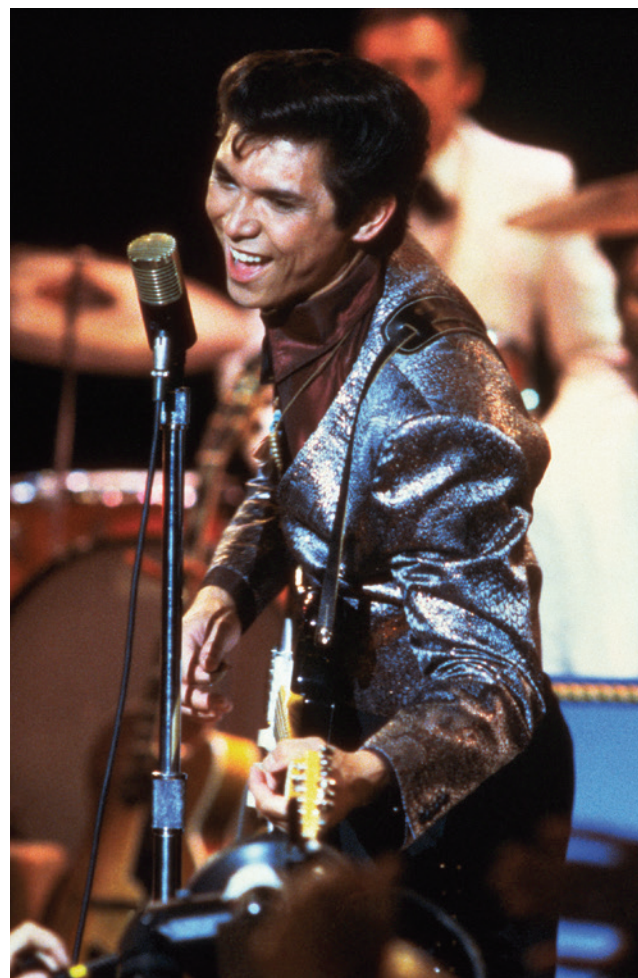
—OLIVER STONE



LA BAMBA

Luis Valdez

Luis Valdez’s roots as a Chicano activist and playwright (*Zoot Suit*) made him a natural to direct a film about Ritchie Valens, a ‘50s Mexican American rocker and contemporary of Buddy Holly. Compared to other rock biopic subjects, Valens was innocence personified. “He has these strong family values,” said Valdez. “He’s not a cutthroat, he’s a gentleman.”



BOUND FOR GLORY

Hal Ashby

This sprawling period epic, chronicling the life of Bob Dylan’s folk hero, the troubadour Woody Guthrie, represented Hal Ashby’s peak period as a filmmaker, bookended as it was between *Shampoo* (1975) and *Coming Home* (1978). In his review, Roger Ebert wrote that Ashby and his Oscar-winning DP Haskell Wexler “re-created the Depression years so well, see them so faithfully, that the movie actually becomes a historical document.”



PHOTOS: PHOTOFEST; (OPPOSITE TOP) AMPAS