

AFI's "100 Years...100 Songs" Does Little to Promote Film History

Commentary by Jim Linz

Watching the American Film Institute's "100 Years...100 Songs" was a painful experience, so painful in fact, that I must admit to watching only sporadically. I was, however, incensed enough to visit AFI's website and review both the list of the 100 "winning" songs and the list of 400 nominated songs. My cursory review found that

- No song from a movie released before 1932 was included in the top 100 and only 6 were included among the 400 nominated songs. How could "The Dance of the Cuckoos" not be considered among the most important film songs of all time. Even today, the Laurel and Hardy theme song is instantly recognized throughout the world. Music was a much more important part of story telling during the era of silent films, yet, in the opinion of AFI's "jurors" none was important enough to make the top 400 songs of all time.
- Of the top 100 songs, only 11 are shown as being from the 1930s, generally regarded as the golden era of both songwriting and the movie musical, whereas 13 songs were selected from the 1980s.
- Several of the top 100 songs were remakes of performances in earlier films with no mention of the earlier film. For example "Varsity Drag" was cited as being from the 1947 remake of "Good News" rather than from the original 1930 "Good News" starring Dorothy McNulty (see *Trans-Lux*, vol. 21, no. 4). Similarly, "Singing in the Rain," selected as the third best song of all time, was cited as being from the 1952 movie of the same name rather than from "The Hollywood Revue of 1929" where it was introduced by Cliff "Ukelele" Edwards in an elaborately staged dance number complete with umbrellas. My quibble here is not with the selection of the songs, but with the missed opportunity to rekindle interest in the original films and in the music of the 1920s and 1930s. Perhaps the most egregious example is AFI's showing "Puttin' on the Ritz" as being the 89th most important song based on its use in the 1974 film "Young Frankenstein." Of course "Puttin' on the Ritz" was introduced by Harry Richman in the 1930 film of the same name.

- Unlike the Academy Awards, AFI included songs used in movies that were not written for the movies. For example, "It Had to Be You," a 1924 tune, was cited as being from the 1989 film "When Harry Met Sally." Similarly, the 1932 tune "As Time Goes By" was cited as the number two song of all time for its use in the 1942 film "Casablanca". In this instance, commentator Michael Feinstein at least recognized that the song was written years earlier, although he did not mention that it was prolifically recorded at that time.
- Once AFI made the decision to include songs used in movies but not written specifically for the movie, two notable exclusions from the list of 400 nominated songs come instantly to mind. In the 1943 film "This is the Army," Irving Berlin comes onstage in a private's uniform to give an inspiring rendition of his 1918 "Oh How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning." In the same film, Kate Smith sings "God Bless America." How could two such uplifting performances during World War II not even be considered among the top 400 movie songs?
- Another song from a war movie, the theme from the 1957 "Bridge on the River Kwai" was also left off the list of 400 nominated songs. At least Xerox© remembers. It uses the theme as the background for one of its new commercials.