

# Bradley Cooper's *A Star Is Born*: It's true, the artist must have "something to say"

Joanne Laurier  
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*Directed by Bradley Cooper; screenplay by Cooper, Eric Roth and Will Fetters*

Actor-director Bradley Cooper's *A Star Is Born* is a film about a rising star in the music business and a declining one. The lead performers are pop singer Lady Gaga as Ally and Cooper as Jack.

The new film is the fourth (or fifth) film version of this particular drama: The first was directed by William Wellman in 1937, the second by George Cukor in 1954 and the third by Frank Pierson in 1976. Cukor's *What Price Hollywood?* (1932) had a similar story.

The new *A Star Is Born* is already a resounding commercial success in part because of public interest in Lady Gaga (Stefani Germanotta, born 1986), in how she would sound in this setting, in whether she could act and in what she would "really" look like underneath all the make-up and extravagant outfits.

Cooper himself is a draw both as a personality and as a first-time director. There is also the undoubted appeal of a human drama, a traditional Hollywood "love story," squeezed in between an apparently endless series of comic-book extravaganzas.

Whether the film lives up to popular expectations is a more complicated question.

Jack is a singer-songwriter superstar and, as the movie opens, performs his country-rock music to a huge outdoor crowd. He is also, we quickly learn, an alcoholic and drug addict. After the concert, he inadvertently visits a drag club in desperate search of a drink. There he sees Ally belt out Édith Piaf's "La Vie en rose" and is immediately captivated, as we are. After the show, Jack and Ally discuss her possible future as a singer and songwriter. He stresses that it boils down to her having "something to say."

Soon Ally is invited by Jack to share the stage at his next concert and sing her own composition, "The Shallow." This is the beginning of her climb to stardom and their personal relationship. While Jack has the support—for a time—of his older brother and tour manager Bobby (Sam Elliott), Ally is bolstered by her rather sweet, Frank Sinatra-loving father (Andrew Dice Clay).

But the arrival on the scene of a high-powered British music

promoter Rez (Rafi Gavron), who forcefully offers to direct Ally's career and, in the process, separates her from Jack, introduces a new, disruptive element. In an overnight transformation, Ally goes from a down-to-earth, piano-playing *chanteuse* to an orange-haired sensation in skin-tight outfits, complete with supporting dancers.

While Jack is reduced to playing back-up guitar at a Roy Orbison commemoration concert, Ally dominates a major music awards ceremony. Inevitably, Jack makes a drunken, humiliating scene when Ally is being honored. After weeks in rehab, and despite his developing tinnitus, Jack wants to turn over a new leaf. Rez, however, has other plans and the situation rapidly turns tragic.

There are likeable features of *A Star Is Born*. Lady Gaga, with her remarkable and emotionally expressive voice, is genuinely appealing both as a performer and as a human being. The scene in the drag bar feels authentic, and the singer is at her best with the Piaf material. (It is probably not high praise for the film's soundtrack that "La Vie en rose" and Orbison's "Pretty Woman" may be its two most compelling songs.)

Unfortunately, in a film focused on his character's supposedly drastic psychological and artistic deterioration, director Cooper hardly misses an opportunity to shine. He is, of course, up against the considerable talents of his co-star and it is clear that he has undergone much training as a vocalist.

One of the film's revelations is the ability of the generally crude and obnoxious Clay to represent a recognizable, relatively decent human being!

Less successful is the heroine's alteration. The problem does not lie primarily in the costume, hair and make-up adjustments, but in music that becomes blander and more conventional.

However, the greatest weakness here is that this *A Star Is Born*, unlike the more successful of its predecessors, never becomes a commentary on the destructive nature of stardom and success and the cruel, unforgiving character of the film or entertainment business.

On the contrary, the new film paints a generally sunny picture of Ally's and Jack's fame and fortune. His downfall is blamed, not on the music business and its machinations, but on an abusive family relationship. If only he weren't an alcoholic, life would be heaven on earth. And while Jack is supposed to

be having a career downslide, his raspy voice still enchants listeners by the tens of thousands. Although he's not the headliner at the Orbison concert, he nonetheless steals the show by playing the guitar brilliantly. Cooper wants to have it both ways and the viewer is not adequately prepared for Jack's ultimate fate.

Furthermore, Ally seems largely unaffected by affluence and celebrity because—it seems safe to say—the filmmakers themselves are comfortable with affluence and celebrity, and take those phenomena almost *entirely* for granted.

The music industry—and wealth—eats people up, especially and notoriously in the US, but that is not a theme here.

And because *A Star Is Born* is not sharply focused or urgently made, it drifts. Ironically, the film's chief weakness is that it does not have much to say, despite the fact the characters keep insisting an artist, above all, needs to have *that!* Like countless other dramatic films at present, it reduces the problems to family dysfunction or abuse, and not the soul-crushing world of false gods and fools' gold.

One of the difficulties is that Cooper's film pays attention to the external trappings of the contemporary entertainment world, but grafts on to them the sensibility and concerns of the earliest versions of *A Star Is Born*, which appeared in a more "sheltered" era. For example, the embarrassment that befalls Jack at the awards ceremony would not, in reality, damage Ally's career in the slightest and would barely make a dent in his—perhaps quite the opposite. The comment attributed to P.T. Barnum, "There's no such thing as bad publicity," holds truer today than at any time in history.

What would most threaten a career in our day and age? The answer jumps out of the headlines. Jack would far more likely be ruined and driven to the most desperate measures if he faced trumped-up accusations of sexual misconduct. Now that would really be the kiss of death! However, if the idea of introducing such a twist had even entered the consciousness of our filmmakers, which it undoubtedly did not, they would have shied away from it in terror.

It is not for nothing that the central drama of *A Star Is Born* was filmed several times during Hollywood's "Golden Age," or that it was worked upon by a number of serious (and in some cases, left-wing) writers and directors.

Clearly, the various artists, including many of the performers, felt deeply about rendering the "dark side" of the studio system ("the real Hollywood behind the glamorous facades," in the words of a review of the 1932 version) and conveying to the public the painful cost that pursuing success exacted and the inevitable tragedies it produced.

The origins of the film's story or situation—a rising star attached to an alcoholic on the way down, and the ruthlessness of the film business—have long roots in Hollywood history and lore. Cukor's *What Price Hollywood?*, the original basis for which was a story by Adela Rogers St. Johns entitled *The Truth About Hollywood*, was reportedly based loosely on the

relationship of actress Colleen Moore and her husband, alcoholic producer John McCormick, as well as the life and death of American director Tom Forman, who committed suicide following a psychological collapse.

Another layer of the ongoing "Hollywood tragedy" was added by political events to Cukor's 1954 *A Star Is Born*. Commenting on the film, critic Philip French noted that the year it came out was "not a particularly happy time anywhere...the Rosenbergs had recently been executed...McCarthyism was rampant and blacklisting in the media at its height." It was not possible, French argued, for a Hollywood filmmaker to refer directly to domestic politics (the closest Cukor's film comes is one character's gibe about a new studio production, "It's got sex and schmaltz. ... And patriotism! Patriotism without end!"), but the significant films inevitably "reflected the tensions of the early Eisenhower era. ... *A Star Is Born* ... is a bleak, ambivalent look at Hollywood with a self-destructive hero who eventually commits suicide."

Although the exclusion and destruction of former star Norman Maine (James Mason) does not result from political blacklisting, the McCarthyite witch-hunts ended hundreds of careers and drove a number of people to their deaths, and in 1954 that would not have been lost on any viewer of Cukor's film. Maine's plaintive, drunken address to the industry audience at an awards ceremony, "I made a lot of money for you, gentlemen, in my time, through the years, haven't I? Well, I need a job now," would also have had a special poignancy.

The final scenes of the 1954 movie portray the film studio apparatus largely as unfeeling and parasitic. One can watch and re-watch it not simply because of the talents of Cukor, Judy Garland (as the rising star), Mason and the rest of those associated with the film, but because that version of *A Star Is Born* spoke to important currents in American life.

Sadly, our present-day filmmakers have few if any concerns of such depth or substance.



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