

## Great Balls of Fire! ★★½

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**Year of Release:** 1989

Review by Randy Parker

**Country:** USA

**Verdict:** Skip It

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The story of Jerry Lee Lewis is ripe with dramatic possibilities. *Great Balls of Fire!* chooses not to explore them. The movie could have been a dramatic psychological character study, or it might have been a backstage look at the music industry or at the history of rock 'n roll. Instead director/co-writer Jim McBride has taken the road of *Tucker* and made a movie that is all flash and no substance. *Great Balls of Fire!* is no more than a glossy, sanitized Hollywood Production of Lewis' life.

The movie chronicles the early days of Lewis' career: his rise to rock stardom, his controversial marriage, and his violent tantrums and alcohol abuse. In telling the story, McBride shows little subtlety or nuance; he paints everything with wide brush strokes. The entire movie is larger than life, including Dennis Quaid's performance as the "Killer."

Quaid displays charisma, flamboyance, and down-home charm in the role. His enthusiasm and cockiness are well suited to conveying the electricity of Jerry Lee's music. Thanks to Quaid's hyper-manic, physical performance and strong stage presence, the concert scenes in *Great Balls of Fire!* are exhilarating, even incendiary. Before one concert, for example, Lewis is beside himself because he has to open for Little Richard. He thinks he should get to headline the concert since "Great Balls of Fire" is the number one song in the country. Fueled by his anger, Lewis takes the stage and delivers a rousing performance of "Great Balls." He whips the crowd into a frenzy by setting his piano afire at the song's climax. As Lewis leaves the stage, he boasts to Little Richard, "Follow that!" Quaid has succeeded in capturing the essence of Jerry Lee, the musician and performer.

On the down-side, Jerry Lee, the person, is nowhere to be found in *Great Balls of Fire!* Neither Quaid's exaggerated one-note performance nor McBride's script lets us into Lewis' head. Just what makes this man tick, besides music and 13-year-old girls? *Great Balls of Fire!* doesn't provide any answers. The movie is paper thin, altogether lacking complexity. It could learn a few things from *Scandal*, or better yet, *La Bamba*.

*Great Balls* is so superficial and so light-weight that we can never take it seriously. Consequently, the movie's few attempts at drama fail miserably; they have neither credibility nor impact. *La Bamba*,

on the other hand, overcame its clichéd rags to riches story to offer some exceptional performances and riveting domestic drama. Esai Morales' performance as Ritchie's jealous and troubled brother haunts me to this day. Lewis' life is at least as rich a source of dramatic material, but *Great Balls of Fire!* carefully avoids developing any serious themes which might disrupt its light tone. Sure, the Killer's music is great, but it's his personal problems which make him interesting, troubling, and controversial. Why even bother to make a film of Lewis' life if you're going to ignore the cutting edges which make him an enigma?

Winona Ryder (as Myra Lewis) manages to instill some depth into the shallow story. Ryder is captivating as she portrays the pain, confusion, and excitement of not only marrying a pop idol but doing so at age 13. Whether she's expressing Myra's wholesome innocence, her sexual awakening, or her reckless abandon while spending Lewis' money, Ryder's screen presence is magnetic, drawing us into the character. Her look of fear and bewilderment at her impromptu wedding ceremony is amusing but also compelling. But despite Ryder's efforts, the movie still left me with the feeling that Myra has been shortchanged, her story and situation underdeveloped. *Great Ball of Fire!* provides no more than a shallow "Classics Illustrated" version of her life-story.

Ultimately, *Great Balls of Fire!* isn't especially memorable, but I have to admit that the movie is fun while it lasts. It may be all style and no substance, but what style! The movie is intensely colorful, and it succeeds in recreating the '50s, complete with classic clothes, cars, and cold war. I also appreciated Peter Cook's cameo as a British reporter and Alec Baldwin's performance as Lewis' cousin and boyhood chum, Jimmy Swaggart. Swaggart's self-righteousness, moral indignation, and religious ranting and ravings are deliciously ironic in light of his eventual fall from grace.

Without question, the highlight of the film is Lewis' music, which he re-recorded for the film with Quaid lip-synching. Lewis is in top form; his passion and talent have not diminished over the years while the technology of recording music has improved dramatically. Consequently, the songs in the movie actually sound better and are more exciting than the originals. I went into *Great Balls of Fire!* indifferent to Lewis' music and I came out

desperately eager to buy the soundtrack. So even though *Great Balls of Fire!* pales in comparison to such fine rock biographies as *La Bamba* and *The*

*Buddy Holly Story*, I have to give the movie credit for getting the music right.

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