

Films focus on superficiais, violent mayhem

By Judith Trojan
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — The long-awaited film about rock legend Jerry Lee Lewis, "Great Balls of Fire!" (Orion Pictures), is fun to watch but has little if any credibility as a serious biography of the troubled musician.

Directed by Jim McBride ("The Big Easy"), "Great Balls of Fire!" covers two key years in Lewis' early career when he almost dethroned Elvis as the king of rock 'n' roll. As the self-styled "Killer" of rock, Lewis (Dennis Quaid) was 21 in 1956 when he took Elvis' label, Sun Records, by storm and promised a spectacular career with such controversial hits as "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin On" and "Great Balls of Fire."

Ripe with sexual suggestiveness, his music was banned from some radio stations as obscene and lambasted by parents and church groups as "the devil's music." But kids loved his raucous "pumpin" piano style and made him a hit. By today's standards, Lewis' work is tame indeed.

Too young and immature to handle his overnight fame and big bucks, Lewis quickly sabotaged his career by marrying his 13-year-old cousin, Myra Gale Brown (Winona Ryder), the schoolgirl daughter of his cousin and bass player, J.W. (John Doe).

Immediately set upon by the British press during a post-marriage tour, Lewis was run out of England and subsequently lost his footing on American charts due to the child-bride scandal.

As depicted here, Lewis and Myra may have had a 10-year age difference, but they were hardly mismatched. Quaid plays the 23-year-old Lewis as a bubble-headed, 9-year-old rooster. Cocky and clownish and a veteran of two previous failed marriages, he nonetheless apparently loved Myra and married her thinking she was a virgin.

Audiences will never know the real nature of their courtship or marriage because Lewis' music and piano-bashing take precedence in this pop-style bio. Quaid handles Lewis' flamboyance well on and off the stage, but the role is all surface flash with no substance. Quaid does not try to imitate the Killer's vocals. Lewis re-recorded all of his hits for this film and they are seamlessly dubbed.

"Great Balls of Fire!" promises much, but in the end is a major letdown. It ends abruptly in 1958 without resolving or delving further into Lewis' career and marriage difficulties. And a tantalizing subplot about Lewis' smarmy cousin Jimmy Swaggart (Alec Baldwin) and their fundamentalist roots is also left hanging.

Director/co-writer McBride has sadly sacrificed much of his subject's serious story for superficial period gloss. There's a story here to be told, but someone else will have to tell it.

Because this film focuses more on entertainment than expose, at times it almost has the stacey feel of an innocuous "Bye Bye Birdie." But parents should not disregard the fact that Lewis is depicted marrying and bedding his 13-year-old second cousin (Ryder acts 13 but looks older), although the girl's parents do initially attempt to end their adolescent flirtations and surprise marriage.

Due to some general sexual innuendo, brief violence and a suggestive sexual encounter between Lewis and his child bride, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

'Lethal Weapon 2'

Despite the built-in appeal of its attractive black-white cop team, "Lethal Weapon 2" (Warner Bros.) is the most mindless of the summer blockbusters so far.

Forget plot and character development. This sequel to the immensely successful 1987 original "Lethal Weapon" is one endless string of intense chases, death-defying stunts, murderous mayhem and numbing bloody carnage. The unlikely cop partners — hotheaded Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) and mature, level-headed Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) — are now inseparable, although Martin's unpredictability still threatens to zap Roger's encroaching retirement.

Their enemy this time at bat is a dastardly South African diplomat (Joss Ackland) whose government immunity in Los Angeles enables him to run a profitable drug trade on the side. To squash his particularly blood-thirsty operation, Murtaugh and Riggs must eventually take the vig-



Dennis Quaid as Jerry Lee Lewis plays while his piano burns in "Great Balls of Fire!" the long-awaited film biography of the rock legend. The U.S. Catholic Conference says the film "is fun to watch but has little if any credibility as a serious biography of the troubled musician."

ilante route, since by film's end a lot of ugly scores have to be settled.

Richard Donner goes for the quick thrill in his second go-round as director. He virtually turns Los Angeles into Rambo terrain and immediately writes off promising material about Murtaugh's family life. The only bright spot in this predictable cop cartoon is pint-sized accountant Leo Getz (Joe

Pesci) who hilariously sticks like glue to protectors Riggs and Murtaugh when he turns state's witness against his sleazy South African employers.

Due to wall-to-wall numbing violence, some profanity and a sexual encounter with shadowed nudity, the USCC classification is O — morally offensive. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

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