

Midler Miscast

'The Rose' is crudely comic

by Frank McGinn

Bursting onto the movie scene like a brickbat in "The Rose", Bette Midler plays a gutsy, self-destructive female rock singer who lives on pills, bourbon and the adulation of her fans, and who tragically OD's on heroin after a brief, hard, generous life. Sound like anyone of whom you know? That's right, it's a Janis Joplin impersonation, inevitably if unfortunately.

Inevitably, because impersonations are what Bette Midler does best. She first surfaced via the gay clubs in New York with her act "The Divine Miss M", an outrageous, baroque, female-type creature who could parody any singing style from The Andrews Sisters to Helen Reddy. This with a wink and a smirk, but also with feeling. Bette Midler combined both wit and heart to good effect on her debut album, *The Divine Miss M*, and subsequent records have averaged about half acting and half singing. She has a wide range of styles and a wonderful set of lungs.

Unfortunately, because Janis Joplin is an inappropriate, unwise choice, Bette Midler's image is essentially light-hearted and campy. She is a put-on artist. Joplin's message was one of total sincerity. She was painfully, exuberantly honest. In my opinion these two personas are equally valid, we need them both, and I just don't see why one of them should pretend to be the other. It's like Carol Burnett doing Marilyn Monroe, only not as a joke. All the maudlin, frantic and obnoxious elements of Joplin's life are represented without any of her redeeming directness and vulnerability. ("The Rose" isn't vulnerable, she's just weak.) And there is no cheeky leer beneath Bette Midler's performance. She plays it straight, climbing into the role and pulling the covers up over her head. *The Divine Miss M* is invisible.

It's not all Bette's fault, however, and it's not all bad. In fact, if you like comic books, it's pretty good. As "The Rose's" ruthless manager, greed incarnate, Allan Bates rants and storms in a manner reminiscent of J. Jonah Jamison, editor of the *Daily Bugle* and arch-foe of "that web-headed web-slinger", Spiderman. And the rest of the story maintains about the same level of sophistication. The action, simple and melodramatic, shamelessly lays on a surface of passion, pathos and crazy, showbiz glamour. "The Rose", it is revealed, is cruelly exploited by everybody in her entourage from her demon manager to the guy who sets up the lights. They all love her, or at least spend a lot of time staring at her and shaking their heads in apparent awe, but no one understands her. They are phenomenally insensitive to her moods.

In short, Rose is a star-victim, although she slugs Wild Turkey from the bottle

and wisecracks with reporters to keep up appearances. The abuse she receives must be an attempt to generate sympathy for the person behind the legend, but it quickly becomes irritating—who wants to watch a defenseless child being kicked to death?—and Rose and I were both about to



crack when Frederic Forrest entered the picture and renewed our faith in mankind. He plays the obligatory "real" person that showbiz personalities always fall in love with in their Hollywood bio's, the one who's not impressed by the glitter and hates phonies. And he's swell. Finally, after all the high-intensity offense, somebody low-key and kind comes along. He's a shot in the arm for Rose, and the movie

generally.

The colourful romance that ensues distracts our attention from the film's crude, obvious flaws, but it cannot cover up the basic fallacy of Bette Midler trying to be Janis Joplin. "The Rose" talks dirty and lives loose, and when she performs she alternately blasts and cajoles her disciples, but it is a deeply superficial impersonation. Bette's acts are all surface, she's a funny, funky lady, and this job requires unfathomable depths. It's not suited for her talents, half the time you can't even hear her wonderful voice over the blaring, rock backup, and she is nowhere near up to its demands. It is difficult to imagine anyone who would be. (And there's no need for it anyway. Janis Joplin is captured with feeling and precision in her posthumous biography, "Janis", a documentary clipped together out of disparate interviews, concerts and whatever. This is a very moving portrait of an extraordinary person.)

The story of Rose's decline and fall becomes so uninviting and ungrinding that when she finally croaks, on-stage in front of a hometown crowd, I had to wipe the tears of laughter from my eyes. Oh baby, baby, baby, baby, oh brother.

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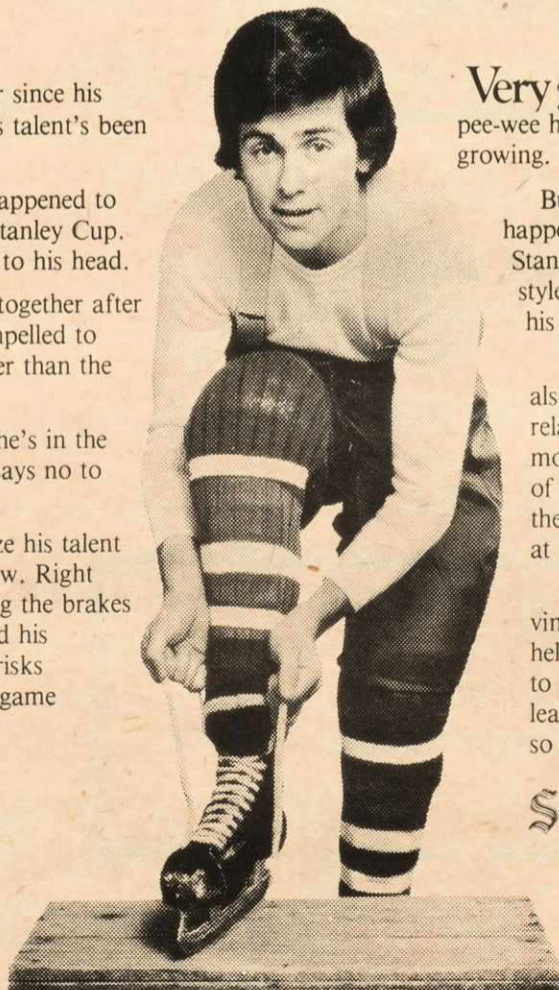
Very poor Ever since his pee-wee hockey days, his talent's been growing.

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