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## Pump Up the satire

by Simon Chung

*Pump Up the Volume*  
directed by Allan Moyle  
Produced by NewLine Cinema

Hubert Humphrey High (named after the 1968 Democratic candidate who lost to Nixon) is a virtual

ARTS



prison camp these days, complete with gestapo-like teachers marshalling the halls. Meanwhile, the students find solace every night in a raunchy pirate radio show. This is the background to the wonderfully subversive *Pump Up the Volume*.

The film centres around a shy, frustrated teenager named Mark Hunter (Christian Slater) who transforms himself at night into the rudely outrageous DJ Happy Harry Hard-on (HHH for short — like the school). The pirate show he hosts, which features Leonard Cohen songs and on-air simulated masturbation (though not at the same time), soon becomes a cult favourite at HH High.

Hunter/Hard-on's listeners, who hang on his every word, include a somewhat stereotypical array of troubled teens: the suicidal nerd, the inwardly unhappy cheerleader and so on. After listening to one of Harry's shows, the nerd commits suicide and the cheerleader blows up her pearls and blow-dryer in a microwave. Naturally, it does not take long for school authorities, the police and the Federal Communications Commission to crack down on the irreverent DJ.

Given the film's subject matter, it would have been very easy for Montreal-bred writer/director Allan Moyle (Times Square) to turn it into a two hour music video. Happily, Moyle never allows music to supersede the story.

The film suffers, however, by focusing exclusively on Hunter/Hard-on. The many teenage issues brought up by Harry's listeners serve as a backdrop to the DJ's rambling, making the film appear superficial and uninvolved. Worse still, Harry's excessive

popularity makes Moyle's vision of high school life in America improbable — who's ever seen so many discontented and troubled teens in one place at the same time (except, perhaps at Degrassi High)? Is this a high school or a reform school?

Logistics aside, the film boasts a powerful performance by Slater, whose previous credits include the cynical teenage murderer in *Heathers*. Slater is quickly becoming the quintessential high school rebel. With his deliciously Nicholson-esque mannerisms (circa *The Shining*), he provides the film with an appropriate amount of perverse sexual intensity. Admittedly, he is much more convincing as the horny DJ than as the introverted Mark Hunter.

Newcomer Samantha Mathis plays the inevitable love interest naturally, with humour.

Although *Pump Up the Volume* can be accused of being overly romantic (to the point of naivety), and even melodramatic, it should be commended for not offering pat, compromising, middle class solutions. In the final scene, the defiant hero urges his supporters to "talk hard" (does that mean we can all masturbate on the air?), proclaiming that the high school years are the worst of one's life, that the trick is to survive them intact. There is something laudable about a film dealing with high school life that repudiates high schools altogether.

I couldn't help wondering, however, how disappointed the optimistic hero will be when he discovers that the world at large is essentially no different from Hubert Humphrey High. Perhaps this will be the subject of Moyle's next film.

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