

TRUE LIFE STORY:
MYTHMAKING IN BIOGRAPHICAL FILMS

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ABSTRACT

Biographical films, commonly referred to as biopics, are concerned with presenting a theatrical, narrative account of a subject's life. These films possess the ability to promote certain myths through their interpretations of the subject's life. In this thesis, I examine three specific films concerned with popular music entertainers as subjects in the larger genre of the biographical or historical film. The selected films scrutinized are *Beyond The Sea*, based on the life of Bobby Darin; *Ray*, based on the life of Ray Charles; and *Walk The Line*, based on the life of Johnny Cash. A textual analysis of these films is used to look at how specific myths and themes are carried out in these films. The scholarship regarding biographical films is currently limited, though the genre continues to gain popularity with filmmakers and audiences. The current text serves to expand the scholarship on this genre, as well as to suggest area for expansion.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, film has gained astounding influence over its audience. The American film industry is a multibillion dollar one, with its reach extending into nearly every international market. Due to this influence and reach, many filmmakers are able to use their work as vehicles to promote agendas and/or to spotlight issues and subjects that would not necessarily be commonly known or exposed otherwise. One of the most popular types of film that can accomplish this ambition has been, and continues to be, those based on actual, historical events or people. Within this broader genre of the historical film, lies the subgenre of the biographical film, often referred to as the biopic. A biopic is a film typically defined as the cinematic portrayal of a real life subject.

Biographical films provide a platform for not only introducing and reviewing knowledge on a specific person(s), they also allow for evaluation of themes present within mass media, filmmaking in general, and our culture and society. They also provide exceptional means to observe the qualities of myth and mythmaking. As both a graduate student and someone who is employed in the music industry, I was especially drawn to biographical films concerned with musical performers. The biopics chosen for inspection in this project were interesting to me due to the differing styles of music each subject was responsible for producing. These films centered around three musicians who wrote and recorded music that spilled across musical genre labels. These subjects were massively popular at the height of their careers, but also experienced fascinating perils, some of which accentuated their uniqueness, while others highlighted what essentially all musicians share. I am particularly interested in exploring how these films are capable of being used to promote, correct, or solidify perceptions of artists, since this is relevant to

my professional career, working with artists in the music industry. The current text will serve as analysis of these qualities as related to three specific biographical films concerned with popular music subjects.

The films under scrutiny are *Beyond The Sea*, based upon the life of Bobby Darin; *Ray*, based upon the life of Ray Charles; and *Walk The Line*, based upon the life of Johnny Cash. Kevin Spacey, who also portrays Bobby Darin in the film, directed *Beyond The Sea*. Lionsgate Films distributed the film. *Ray* was directed by Taylor Hackford, starred Jamie Foxx as Ray Charles, and was distributed by Universal Pictures. *Walk The Line* was directed by James Mangold, starred Joaquin Phoenix as Johnny Cash, and was distributed by 20th Century Fox. These films were chosen due to their comparable aims, release dates, and plights of the protagonist, and with primary consideration given to their similarities in terms of the career trajectory of the central subject, the era of each film setting, and musical styling of the entertainer.

This examination will be carried out as a textual analysis, probing how events that have actually occurred and/or the lives of real life subjects are treated in the biographical film genre within the confines of theories on authenticity and mythmaking. This study will use theoretical lenses concerned with the ideas of mythmaking and authenticity, primarily from theorist Roland Barthes. It will contribute further research to the area of the musical biopic, which has not attracted a lot of film scholarship. In addition to the breakdown of the three specific biographical films previously mentioned, additional context will be drawn from scholars who have examined films within the larger biographical film genre as well as the few scholars that study biographical films related to musical performers.

Examining the biographical film genre can present numerous challenges, especially in regards to arranging a study on its potentially subjective topics, such as how events or lives are portrayed in the film text versus the contrast of other texts centered around the subject, such as autobiographies or biographies.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

For this project, existing literature concerned with the genre of the biographical film, how historical facts and events are portrayed and subsequently received in these films, how truth and authenticity are handled in these works, and the notions of myth and mythmaking will be used. The literature will come from respected academic journals or published books.

The preeminent scholar on the biographical film genre is George Custen. Not only is Custen considered the most significant author on the subject; he is a pioneer in the field starting with his 1992 book *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*. The follow-up is his 2000 article, “The Mechanical Life in the Age of Human Reproduction: American Biopics, 1961-1980.” In the article, he assesses how the post-studio era of Hollywood had to adapt to new challenges and how these challenges directly impacted the production and release of biographical films. Custen’s work, especially in this article, is primarily qualitative, but he does lean on his past quantitative studies to make his case. He provides a stout history of the genre and an analysis of what every decade contributed to the industry. One of the most extensive areas of his study involves the establishment of the television industry. With the formation of this new medium, the film industry executives were left bewildered regarding how they could continue to make compelling films that could not easily be reproduced on the smaller screen. Out of this quandary came many of the films that are now more commonly revered as blockbusters.

Most literature that has been written about the biographical film genre has focused on examining a very small sample of films, (in most cases just one film and very rarely

over four) or a specific subcategory within the genre. Such is the case with Ian Inglis' study of the accuracy and reliability of biopics (focused on popular music) entitled: "Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic." The article explores the relationship between music, film, and history and "the inevitable tensions between historical accuracy and commercial considerations," as Inglis takes a look at several recent biopics, including two that are examined in this study.

Inglis expresses interest in why biographical films are made, and ponders why some (biographical) subjects are deemed more worthy of having films made about them than others. He presents the following as three ideas of what popular music biopics seek to do:

1. To present an accurate picture of reality, a more or less plausible account of historical events.
2. To fabricate a version of history that may be subjective, idiosyncratic, prejudiced.
3. To fashion a commercially attractive product in which questions of accuracy and evidence are actually seen as irrelevant. (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007)

Inglis' outlining of the different aims of biopics is very relevant and useful to many of the objectives of this project. He summarizes by saying "concern for historical accuracy and literal truth will always come second to a concern for cinematic convention and commercial success." (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007)

In "Representing popular music stardom on screen: the popular music biopic," Lee Marshall and Isabel Kongsgaard, examine several aspects of biopics, with close

attention placed on how authenticity is portrayed. They emphasize that biopics “contribute to individual star images but they also reproduce broader narratives of popular music stardom.” (Marshall & Kongsgaard, 2012)

A key component of their work “discusses the popular music biopic’s ambiguous relationship to truth,” and has three main sections: “originality, and the relationship between art and life; the music industry; and the pressures of fame, or the tension of public and private.” (Marshall & Kongsgaard, 2012) Elaborating on these ideas, they state, “On the one hand, the biopic must continually assert its truthfulness in order to gain the authority that a biopic needs to be believable and a source of audience pleasure. On the other hand, however, the biopic can never be a ‘real’ truth as it is constrained by both the conventions of cinematic realism and broader ideologies of popular music stardom. In its complicated merging of truth and fiction, we argue, the popular music biopic reflects the socially constructed nature of stardom more generally.” (Marshall & Kongsgaard, 2012) Because of this, they attest that capturing the “feel” of a specific historical period is many times considered by the audience to be more important than the elements of costume, casting, location, etc.

Julie Roy Jeffrey takes an in-depth look at the historical accuracy of the motion picture, *Amistad*, in her work, “Amistad (1997): Steven Spielberg’s ‘true story.’” She puts much effort into examining how the director, Steven Spielberg, and his team had to re-create an event that was unfamiliar to most, the 1839 mutiny of the *Amistad*, a Cuban slave trading ship.

“As the film began its run in movie theaters, the discussion expanded beyond the question of how filmmakers utilized history to other issues like audience tolerance of

disturbing historical material. This examination of the film's reception, its development, and its representation of the Amistad affair reveals how complicated and elusive the relationship between film and history can be." (Jeffrey, 2001)

Most of Jeffrey's work focuses on the film's portrayal of the historical events that occurred. She elaborates on this by saying:

Filmmakers must invent scenes, dialogues, and even characters in order to tell their stories, and if done properly, these inventions play an historical role when they add to the audience's understanding of the past. Furthermore, the presence of small inaccuracies may not seriously mar the overall interpretation and should not be the major reason for labeling a film ahistorical. (Jeffrey, 2001)

She speculates a little deeper still on the topic of what the audience and even the filmmakers may wish to gain from films portraying actual events, specifically *Amistad*, with the following:

As one documentary filmmaker has pointed out, 'our need to believe what we want to believe is a lot stronger than our need to seek the truth'. The desire to cast the Amistad events into a simple dramatic framework that highlighted black nobility and contrasted it to white self-interest and baseness discouraged filmmakers from exploring the character of white reformers or the society of which they were a part. (Jeffrey, 2001)

Christoph Classen analyzed the film *Schindler's List* in his 2009 article, "Balance Truth: Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* Among History, Memory, and Popular Culture." He discusses that in the making of this film, due to the sensitivity of the subject matter (the Holocaust), extra detail was given to the correctness of the facts. He reflects on how other films based on actual events have been made, striving for a balance of maintaining accuracy and keeping a narrative perspective.

Fiction films, as art, evoke emotions and are designed according to separate aspects of art and aesthetics, for example, by following narrative rules. Additionally, they open a space of possibility that achieves its impact especially by the fact that it is not identical with reality. To that extent it seems quite

surprising at first glance that a growing number of historical films—non-documentary films—claim to tell “true” stories that are supposed to have occurred in this or a similar way. This amounts to a self-constraint that seems to counteract their actual potential. (Classen, 2009)

The different motives that are used when making historical films are examined in Gil Bartholyens’s work, “Representation of the Past in Films: Between Historicity and Authenticity. He declares, “To tackle history cinematographically, the author must position himself in a personal relationship with it and from this position must decide whether to history is to constitute only a dramatic pretext or whether the film should have, in addition, a teleological intention; i.e., an intention that constitutes a historical aim.” (Bartholyens, 2000) He looks at the differences “between ‘authenticity’ of the represented past and the historicity of the representation.” (Bartholyens, 2000) He concludes that there is not so much a difference as a “fundamental connection between the impossibility of representing history and the possibility of making it live.” (Bartholyens, 2000) In his summation he proclaims, “‘authenticity’ can redeem a lacking of historicity, but not the reverse.” (Bartholyens, 2000)

Dennis Bingham takes a long, thorough look at nearly twenty biopics in his book, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* The effort examines how Hollywood introduces the biographical subject into our culture, demonstrating that much of what is learned about these (biographical) subjects is learned from these films. Some of the films in his study include: Oliver Stone’s *Nixon*, Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X*, *Ed Wood*, *Erin Brockovich*, and *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*. He goes into great detail about the genre of biographical films, tracing its origins and development as well as explaining how films in

this genre might be categorized. He argues the biopic has a long history and has gone through development stages.

Emerging from each of its historical cycles with certain modes that continue to be available to filmmakers working in the form, are:

1. The classical, celebratory form (melodrama)
2. Warts-and-all (melodrama/realism)
3. The transition of a producer's genre to an auteurist director's genre (Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, Oliver Stone, Mary Harron, Julian Schnabel, etc.)
4. Critical investigation and atomization of the subject (or the Citizen Kane mode)
5. Parody (in terms of choice of biographical subject; what Alexander and Karaszewski call the "anti-biopic—a movie about somebody who doesn't deserve one" [man vii], mocking the very notions of heroes and fame in a culture based on consumerism and celebrity rather than high culture values)
6. Minority appropriation (as in queer or feminist, African American or third world, whereby Janet Frame or Harvey Milk and Malcolm X or Patrice Lumumba own the conventional mythologizing form that once would have been used to marginalize or stigmatize them)
7. Since 2000, the neoclassical biopic, which integrates elements of all or most of these (Bingham, 2010)

Richard Voeltz reflects on instructing a course entitled, *American History*

Through Film, at Cameron University in his essay, "Teaching American history through film: Hollywood blockbuster, PBS, History Channel, or the Postmodern?" He states what his initial intentions were for the class by saying:

Going beyond using films as historical evidence, I wanted to address the issue of whether Hollywood historical films—traditionally sneered at by some historians but by no means all—make good as well as bad history. Are historical dramas—the now accepted genre of "Faction"—more useful in teaching history than "talking head" documentaries? How do filmmakers, promoters, viewers, students, and scholars understand film as history? Whether historical films make good or bad history really does matter. There is an old saying about history with different phrasings—and I am not sure who said it first: "There is the history that happened, there is the history that historians create, and then there is the history that people believe." And that history increasingly comes from films and television programs. (Voeltz, 2010)

Voeltz uses a quote from filmmaker Oliver Stone, known for his controversial “historical” films such as *JFK* and *Nixon* (1995), about the relationship between facts, historians, and filmmaking. This demonstrates the feelings of one popular filmmaker towards criticism he may have received or expected to receive from historians.

As far as facts go, I used them as best I could, but the truth is, you can't use them all. You are forced to omit some. And any honest historian will tell you that he does that, too. Let's face it—any historian knows that jealousy plays a huge factor in human affairs. We're especially vulnerable here in Hollywood to a public fantasy business that is fodder for the media. The outside world thinks of us all as rich and irresponsible. But the truth is, many of us work long hours (60 to 80-hour weeks for some directors) and are harried by the pressure to make films pleasing to large audiences within an expensive financial structure. I think many historians, whether they know it or not, are equally subject to this jealousy, and, thinking that history is their territory only, they come at filmmakers with an attitude of hostility. To them we pervert the paradigm with emotion, sentimentality, and so on. But historians exhibit much pomposity when they think that they alone are in custody of the “facts”, and they take it upon themselves to guard “the truth” as zealously as the chief priests of ancient Egypt; the prophecies must belong to them and them alone. I don't think anyone who knows of the jealousies extant in any cerebral profession, be it history or filmmaking, will question the petty infighting that results each year for prizes, awards, and tenure—all at the expense of true investigation or creation. (Voeltz, 2010)

Voeltz synthesizes his experiences with the course by stating, “Students learned how to use popular American films to understand competing perspectives on American history, race, culture, national identity, and society, exposing the fault lines between national myths and the historical experience of people typically excluded from those myths.” (Voeltz, 2010)

In his book, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past*, Robert Toplin, a history professor at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington, investigates the debate between historical accuracy and creative freedom. He gives a thorough inspection to eight films based on various historical events. He demonstrates the

influence that these films can have on the how the public receives the content put forth in the films.

Movies dealing with historical themes and personalities have excited public interest throughout much of the twentieth century... Critics of historical movies have recognized that Hollywood's version of the past can make a significant impact on the viewers. Dramatic motion pictures that feature famous stars in the roles of historical characters and present vivid scenes of yesteryear through sophisticated cinematography can make strong impressions. Historical films help to shape the thinking of millions. (Toplin, 2010)

A unique approach is used by Charles Fairchild in his critical analysis of Gus Van't's film, *Last Days*. His work titled, "Revealing What We Can Never Know: The Problem of Real Life in Gus Van Sant's *Last Days*," takes a look at how the filmmaker (Van Sant) employs a fictitious plot to unveil many of the shortcomings of biographical films. This film mimicks the life of Nirvana frontman, Kurt Cobain, but is told through the story of rocker, "Blake," an artificial character. "Gus Van Sant, deliberately avoids resolving the tensions he creates and, in doing so, sharpens our understanding of the ways in which biographical films routinely claim to overcome distance between what we think we know about musical celebrities and what we can actually know about them." (Fairchild, 2013) "Van Sant uses metaphors instead of facts, characters instead of real people, allegories instead of biographies, always seeming to prefer ambiguity over clarity." (Fairchild, 2013) Fairchild points out that we can never really truly know the subject of a biographical film, because the portrait the audience receives is negotiated in some form or fashion and "fosters some illusory sense of intimacy." (Fairchild, 2013) In this film, Van Sant uses the character of Blake to illustrate "the difference between the truths we are so often told we already know and the uncomfortable reality of just how far we are from the certainty we think we already possess." (Fairchild, 2013) "Van Sant

subtly moves in-between all these broadly recognized functions of the musician biopic to demonstrate the limits of narrative biography on film and thereby illustrate the pretence to certainty purported by many such tales.” (Fairchild, 2013) “In order to write and produce a ‘historical film’ it is necessary to build up a network of knowledge, a ‘system’ that will enable one to imagine the physical setting associated with a given culture and, if needs be, to make it as coherent, as mentally complete, as our reality.” (Fairchild, 2013)

Gerald Horne looks at how myth of historical figures is manifested in his work, “‘Myth’ and the Making of ‘Malcolm X.’” He shows that the myth involved in the Spike Lee film, *Malcolm X*, along with various other works, promotes a specific myth about the African American culture. He points out how many facts and truths are ignored or manipulated to fit into a cinematic tale that is pleasing to the audience. Dealing with a public figure like Malcolm X, so much myth has been constructed that the film portrayal needed to corroborate that myth to establish its authority vs. establishing the truth. What the film can be seen as doing is giving audiences a new interest in his life and therefore inspiring further research for a complete history vs. supplying the story of an empty myth.

Dan Edelstein examines the differences in Barthes’ two works, *Michelet* and *Mythologies* in his article, “Between Myth and History: Michelet, Levi-Strauss, Barthes, and the Structural Analysis of Myth.” He points out the comparisons of how “the linguistics-based theory underlying Barthes’s ‘structural analysis of myths’ is basically the same as the thematic theory found in *Michelet* and highlights the following similarities between themes and myths. (Edelstein, 2003)

1. The first condition for recognizing both themes and myths is their repetition. A theme must be “repeated throughout the work” and be found in a variety of

objects. Likewise, a myth must be recurrent and appear in more than one guise:

“This repetition of the concept through different forms is precious to the mythologist, it allows him to decipher the myth.”

2. Since both myth and theme are repeated in a number of different objects, they must possess some essential aspect that does not change, something that is repeated. For the myth, what recurs is the concept.
3. For the concept to form part of a myth, however, rather than simply be connoted, it must figure in an ideological network.” (Edelstein, 2003)

Walter Benjamin’s effort, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” provides an excellent theory based work that will be used later in the current project to assist with an analysis of authenticity.

Examining biographical films provides a multitude of different perspectives to evaluate. This undertaking will look at both themes present in these films, as well as the myth that these films construct or perpetuate. Though separate concepts, the existing themes and myths are connected due to the potential of how themes can be used to demonstrate mythmaking in these films.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

As previously stated, this essay thoroughly inspects three films within the popular music biographical film genre. Analyzing three films provides a sufficient sample size of films to carry out an appropriate discussion and comparison. If more than three films were analyzed, the essay could easily lose its aim and might be tempted to provide a shallow investigation of the themes and objectives involved.

The films that have been chosen are: *Beyond The Sea*, *Ray*, and *Walk The Line*, which are concerned with the lives of Bobby Darin, Ray Charles, and Johnny Cash, respectively. These specific films were not chosen exclusively for the intrigue of the protagonist, but due to several other considerations. All of the films were released within thirteen months of one another, *Ray* on October 29, 2004, *Beyond The Sea* on December 7, 2004, and *Walk The Line* on November 8, 2005. The fact that each film was released in the fourth quarter of the calendar year is a strong indicator that the responsible film studio felt they were contenders for nominations for the industry's prestigious awards, i.e.: the Academy Awards, the Golden Globes, the Screen Actors Guild Awards. Each film is concerned with (roughly) the same era, mid-twentieth century and varying genres of pop music. Ray Charles began his recorded music career in 1949, Johnny Cash in 1955, and Bobby Darin in 1956. All three men continued to record music until the time of their deaths, Darin in 1973, Cash in 2003, and Charles in 2004. Each film is also based on the life of a male solo artist. All of these parallels aid in providing a cohesive analysis and reduce a tendency to blame any discrepancies in the study on dissimilar factors.

The selected three films share a number of important themes. The major themes shared which will be explored include: troubled childhood and adolescent years, early career obstacles, strained romantic relationships and adultery, achieved fame and its effect on ego, drug or substance abuse, and ultimate reinvention, redemption and/or comeback.

Each of these films can easily be considered the “definitive” account of their respected subject’s life. It is extremely unlikely that each man will have another theatrically released film made about his life, and this was taken into consideration when choosing the films to analyze. It is also probable that because they are viewed as the “definitive” versions, audiences are more likely to view them with high regard and as authentic, than say a television production or one-of-many films on the same subject.

A textual analysis exploring the common themes in these films will be employed to provide a means of looking at how the theories of authenticity and mythmaking are used in biographical films.

CHAPTER 4: HISTORY/BACKGROUND

Biopics

While the basis of all works within the biographical film genre center around the same agenda: creating a unique account of an individual's life, the methods used to accomplish this agenda can vary greatly. Many films choose to concentrate on a specific time period of the subject's life, while others seek to provide a broader narrative that covers the entirety of that life. Other differences that are employed by filmmakers in the genre concern how the story is presented. Many films tell much of their stories through flashbacks, while others convey their stories as chronological pieces that are told start to finish, while others, still, use a hybrid of many different techniques to express their version of these stories.

Biographical films cover a wide range of subjects, from the deeply obscure to the very prominently known and recognizable. Not only does the scope of the genre span the level(s) of notoriety each subject has attained, it also bridges a vast array of vocations and areas of specialty. Samplings of the fields that have been covered in recent popular biographical films include: music, visual art, politics, invention, science, technology, sports, literature, and public service/activism, among many others.

The popularity of this genre has swelled in recent years. Within each of the aforementioned areas, selected examples of notable recent biopics include, visual art: *Pollack*/Jackson Pollack; politics: *The Iron Lady*/Margaret Thatcher; invention: *Temple Grandin*/Temple Grandin; science: *The Theory of Everything*/Stephen Hawking; technology: *Jobs*/Steve Jobs; sports: *42*/Jackie Robinson; literature: *Capote*/Truman Capote; public service/activism: *Milk*/Harvey Milk. It is important to mention that this is

a very brief sampling of the many biographical films that have been produced in recent years. It is not the intention of this study to provide an exhaustive list of films in the genre, but rather demonstrate its influence by spotlighting its popularity and scope.

Biopics and historical dramas are highly regarded as a genre, within the media and entertainment community, with the genre perennially leading the nominations at industry award shows. In 2014, at The 86th Academy Awards show, five (*12 Years A Slave*, *Captain Phillips*, *Dallas Buyers Club*, *Philomena*, and *The Wolf of Wall Street*) of the nine best picture nominees were historical dramas based on actual events, with a sixth (*American Hustle*) being loosely based on an actual events.

There seems to be no indication of biopic production slowing, as witnessed by the slate of films released in 2014-2015 that can be categorized in the biopic or historical drama genre. These films include *Foxcatcher*/Olympian Mark Schultz and his coach, John Eleuthère du Pont; *Imitation Game*/British mathematician Alan Turing; *Exodus: Gods and Kings*/Biblical hero, Moses; *Unbroken*/ war hero, Louis Zamperini; *Big Eyes*/visual artist Margaret Keane; *American Sniper*/US Navy Seal, Chris Kyle; *Selma*/Civil Rights leaders including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; among others. Four of these films: *American Sniper*, *Big Eyes*, *Unbroken*, and *Selma* were released on Christmas Day 2014, which is habitually reserved not only for films that are expected to perform well at the box office, but also for those that are anticipated to be favored for nominations at industry award shows.

There are also a great number of films that, without question, fall under into the broader genre of historical films that aren't framed as biopics, but could be considered so. These films, while concentrated on a central character or group of central characters, are

chiefly concerned with a specific occasion or occurrence in which the subject or subjects played a critical role. A recent example of this type of film that gained not only commercial success, but also received industry praise is *Argo*. *Argo* is based on the events of the withdrawal of six Americans in the 1979 Iran hostage crisis, specifically the role that CIA specialist, Tony Mendez played in their removal. *Argo* took home the coveted Best Picture price in 2013 at the 85th Academy Awards ceremony.

Several other notable examples belonging in this class of films are:

Invictus/Nelson Mandela/François Pienaar, the captain of the South African rugby union team, The Springboks; *All The President's Men*/Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward and the Watergate scandal; *Saving Mr. Banks*/P.L. Travers and Walt Disney's partnership on the film adaption of Mary Poppins; *Quiz Show*/'21' show scandal involving contestants Charles Van Doren and Herb Stempel; *Schlinder's List*/Oskar Schindler's heroics during World War II; *Cool Runnings*/the 1988 Jamaican Olympic men's bobsled team; *Miracle*/the 1980 U.S. Olympic men's hockey team; *Red Tails*/Tuskegee airmen; *Apollo 13*/the 1970 Apollo 13 lunar mission; *Captain Phillips*/Captain Richard Phillips and the Maersk Alabama hijacking; *Zodiac*/the Zodiac killer; *Charlie Wilson's War*/Charlie Wilson and Operation Cyclone; among many others.

A related grouping of films is what can be considered "biofiction." (Inglis, Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic, 2007) This refers to films such as *Glitter*/Mariah Carey; *8 Mile*/Eminem; *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'*/50 Cent; *A Hard Day's Night*/The Beatles; *Catch Us If You Can*/The Dave Clark Five; *Ferry Cross The Mersey*/Gerry and the Pacemakers; *I've Gotta Horse*/Billy Fury; *Spice World*/Spice Girls. (Inglis, Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic, 2007) These films are

usually concerned with popular music, and star the musician(s) the film is loosely based on, while films such as, *The Rose*; *Last Days*; *Dreamgirls* star different actors/musicians than the subject that they are roughly based.

It is my intention to bring awareness to the varying types of films that portray and surround actual or historical events in an attempt to emphasize the popularity of such films and establish them as worthy of extensive analysis. This specific study will concentrate on one of the more popular subsections in the biographical film genre, the popular music biopic. Some examples representing various musical genres include: *I'm Not There*/Bob Dylan; *What's Love Got To Do With It*/Tina Turner; *Amadeus*/Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart; *DeLovely*/Cole Porter; *Coal Miner's Daughter*/Loretta Lynn; *La Bamba*/Ritchie Valens; *The Doors*/The Doors; *The Buddy Holly Story*/Buddy Holly; *Great Balls of Fire*/Jerry Lee Lewis; *Selena*/Selena, among many others.

The popularity of biopics concerned with musical entertainers has reached a fever pitch as of late, with a substantial increase in the production of these films since the turn of the 21st century. Recent and upcoming releases since 2014 in this subcategory contain: *Get on Up*/James Brown; *Behind The Candelabra*/Liberace; *Sexual Healing*/Marvin Gaye; *Miles Ahead*/Miles Davis; *I Saw The Light*/Hank Williams; *The Last Train To Memphis*/Elvis; *Tupac*/Tupac Shakur; *Bessie*/Bessie Smith; *Straight Outta Compton*/Dr. Dre, Easy-E, Ice Cube; *The Dirt*/Motley Crue; *Mercury*/Freddie Mercury; *Rocketman*/Elton John; *Whitney*/Whitney Houston.

As previously established, biographical films have specific techniques that are commonly employed within the genre. Popular music biopics seek to differentiate themselves from other biopics, but generally adopt many of the conventions that are

standard in the broader biographical film genre. This study will identify a sampling of the differences, and highlight multiple similarities that popular music biopics utilize.

This project seeks to not strictly consider the different ways these films are produced and presented, but also to contemplate the motivation in making these films. What criteria are considered when evaluating who or what will make a compelling biographical film subject? It is easy to look for a subjective answer to this question. While the very nature of the genre operates in subjectivity, this study will take an objective approach when analyzing why and how biographical films are made. I would like to suggest the following as considerations. Why are certain lives so appealing to observe and examine versus others? Why do studios and filmmakers consistently and continually go back to the well of historical events and figures as fodder for their motion pictures? Is there also an economic motivation, such as a connection between the film company and the music company, in which those producing the films benefiting from increased record sales? The type of lives, and moreover, the specific lives chosen for biopics can be telling for what is valued in our culture. What these films choose to address and focus upon, often mirror what we, as a collective audience, cherish, or what film producers believe we, the audience, will cherish. These films can signify what is important and intriguing to American audiences.

My research suggests the optimal biopic subject to be someone who is well known, with a high level of recognition to the average audience member, but concurrently maintains an ample level of mystery. The biopic subject doesn't necessarily have a lot known about his/her life and therefore still possesses enough obscurity to make a fascinating film subject. Celebrities seek varying levels of fame, however. Many

entertainers are in reality very shy and reserved people; it is possible they desire to strictly use their talents to entertain audiences as a creative outlet. Another consideration involves the era of one's fame. Those whose careers or lives pre-dated certain media are more appealing to feature in biopics because less is known about their lives.

Television and the Internet have changed how the audiences learn about celebrities. Today, there are many ways to learn about the private life of public figures. Celebrities now promote the details of their days via social media (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Pintrest), which provides an intimate glimpse into the lives of these stars. The public is now able to learn about a beloved actor's favorite food; an adored musician's favorite color, latest movie they've seen or book they've read; or a chosen athlete's favorite new musical act or album. Many figures are broadcasting their own biography as it happens/in real time; there is little mystique left surrounding the personal and private lives of entertainers.

“Private lives of individuals can be turned into public events by being publicized through the mass media. The nature of what is public and what is private, and the demarcation between these domains, are transformed in certain ways by the development of mass communication.” (Thompson, 1990) The impact of the paparazzi also affected this in the latter half of the 20th century. Tabloid magazines, purposefully, made it their mission to expose a behind-the-scenes look at the lives of entertainers, many times exposing outlandish exaggerations and untruths about their targets. In the pre-Internet period many entertainers could lead a rather self-contained private life. Before this era of exposure, even those with considerable fame could escape the public eye, if they so chose, and maintain a bit of mystery. By doing so, this increased the public's desire to

know more about them and therefore it provided an incentive for biographers and media to tell their story. Many times the subject penned his/her own memoir or autobiography, or endorsed someone to write a secondhand account of his/her life. Often these stories were adapted for film. The biopic provided a way for the masses to learn about the private life of the celebrity in question. Reading a biography or autobiography on a subject requires a significant investment of time spent alone and is typically only reserved for dedicated fans of the subject. Film, on the hand, can be consumed in a social setting with others and only requires a time investment of approximately two hours. The audience for biographical films is likely to much greater than those of books on the same subjects, because these films are apt to capture not only the dedicated admirers of the subject, but the casual viewers that are willing to commit a small amount of time to watching. Many viewers are satisfied with gaining an overall knowledge of a subject in only two hours. The amount of prior knowledge a viewer has about a subject plays into whether or not he/she will have a favorable opinion of the movie, as well as his/her opinion on the actors portraying the subjects, as discussed later in the current text.

It is also important to assess why a specific area of a subject's life is thought to be more interesting, and therefore receive more consideration, than others. Are we, as the audience, looking for something portrayed in these life stories to which we can relate? Are we hoping for the unknown parts of celebrities lives to provide us with an exotic escape so foreign from our own existence that it offers an intrigue that we cannot avoid pursuing? There are several questions biographers must consider when selecting what the focus of the work will be and what the intended result is. As Robert Rosenstone writes in his study of history in film, the following questions arise, "is biography the

story of great people (for most of history, men) we wish to emulate, or great villains we wish to condemn? Should it show its subject as a creature of the times or someone who rises above history and helps to create the times, or somehow split the difference and have it both ways?” (Rosenstone R. A., 2006)

In American biopics, oftentimes, the pursuit of the American Dream, and the trials associated, becomes an overwhelming factor and theme for the filmmaker. “As communicated in the celebrity biopic, the American Dream, framed by the ideology of individuality, follows a particular trajectory: personal struggle, individual effort, responsibility, and unique talent lead to great material wealth for both protagonists, but their immoral behavior eventually overwhelms them, creating a host of professional and personal problems along the way.” (Smith, Jr., 2009) Biopics concerned with American subjects oftentimes use the pursuit of the American Dream to connect with audiences. This is evident in the three films assessed in this study: *Beyond The Sea*, *Ray*, and *Walk The Line*. As reviewed in the following sections, this study will examine how each of the main subjects of the biopics pursued his idea of this dream in the context of musical careers.

When recreating or retelling occurrences that actually took place, how much attention is paid to getting the facts straight? I argue that what is portrayed as truth in film is more likely to be received as such, if it affirms what has been already been perceived as true about the subject. The impetus behind this study is to uncover and analyze ways in which truth, authenticity, and myth are used and handled in making biographical films, with considerations given to whether they are intended to educate and inform or purely made for entertainment, as well assessing potential challenges behind

making these films. Do these films become the sole or main source for the audience's opinions of the (biographical) subject? To what degree can myth be detected in these films? There is much to consider when performing a complete study of the factors involved with these queries. It is impossible, in this study, to consider everything that contributes to the making of a biographical film, but Rosenstone identifies six tendencies of historical film, "to present a moral tale, to concentrate on the story of individuals, to discount any alternative narratives, to emotionalize and personalize, to exaggerate the visual elements of the past, and to rely on a linear sense of time." (Rosenstone R. , 1995) These serve as suitable guidelines for the evaluation at hand.

A very important consideration when exploring the nature and function of biopics is the notion of celebrity. The concept of celebrity is very closely tied to the broader themes in mythmaking. Celebrity can refer to the specific individual or to the state of possessing fame, and can be formed in a myriad of ways. A recent trend in the entertainment fields has allowed those who are not necessarily recognized for achievement in any reputable field to attain celebrity status for simply being famous; while there are others who have earned remarkable accomplishments in significant areas that are never considered celebrities - this generally occurs in a field that has nothing to do with entertainment, such as medicine or science. The entertainment industry has found their audiences to be intensely interested in the ins and outs of the private lives of celebrities. "It is the tension between the two sides of the persona, larger-than-life and the 'real' person, coupled with tension between the possibility and impossibility of knowing the truth about her life which makes celebrities so intriguing to the public and such apt ideological symbols." (Myers, 2009) Filmmakers, movie studios, marketing

companies, and actors all work this fascination to their advantage, as celebrity can be easily manufactured. “P.T. Barnum, chief among the publicity architects, understood that fame was not just the result of individual recognition but also the invention and manipulation of image.” (Smith, Jr., 2009)

With regards to this current analysis, celebrity is important for two reasons. Firstly, since this is an examination of films based on real life subjects, it is essential to look at how the celebrity of each subject was created. These identities, which can be formed by calculated planning or accidental development, are bonded to the individual’s public image. “The construction of one’s persona is a product of self-participation, media and industry reinforcement, and audience acknowledgement.” (Hayward, 2006)

Secondly, the celebrity and public identity of the actor(s) playing the real life subject(s) in the biographical film has significant influence over how the subject will be received by audiences. “The blurring of the private/public distinction that occurs in celebrity media is essential for maintenance of their star power.” (Myers, 2009) This is a tendency especially true in American culture. “No society has worshipped the celebrity figure as intently as Americans have.” (Smith, Jr., 2009) Many viewers have difficulty in removing their preconceived notions of the actor when considering a portrayal in a film. This can be true of any film, but often exists with biographical films. This is an important concern for casting directors, film directors, and studio executives when making the crucial decision of who should portray a subject, or subjects, in a biographical film. Much is known about the actors and actresses portraying these entertainers, since they have chosen to pursue endeavors that force them to be in the public eye. The paradoxical nature of the yearning to preserve a private life for those who have chosen

careers that force them into public scrutiny is no more apparent than in biopics. “The heartbeat of such films resides in this tension between the performer’s attempt to sustain a professional and private life.” (Schlotterbeck, "Trying to find a heartbeat": Narrative music in the pop performer biopic, 2008)

Biopics are as much about the struggles in the life of the subject as they are the successes. It is nearly impossible to find a biopic in which the subject has not faced adversity in the form of (childhood) family distress, poverty, substance abuse and/or addiction, racism, physical limitations, or a number of other hardships, this is especially true with popular music biopics. These biopics typically follow a formula that begins with a troubled childhood, whether it be problems regarding his/her relationship with his/her parents and/or other family members and/or poverty, followed by an aspiration to overcome these circumstances using a specific talent, an achieved success in the chosen field, a struggle to maintain a romantic relationship and/or friendships, along with an addiction to drugs and/or alcohol, a fall from fame, and an ultimate reconciliation, redemption, and/or rise back to prominence.

The role of the spouse or romantic partner is key in nearly every biopic, especially those relating to the musicians. These stories contain so many up and downs, that the partner can act as an anchor or as a hindrance. Further detailed examples drawn from the three films that are the subject of this analysis will be provided. Most biopics deal with subjects who struggle maintaining a healthy relationship with his/her spouse or significant other. There are exceptions to this custom, and some biopics focus on subjects with strong long-term marriages with one spouse however, those who have troubled relationships oftentimes make for more compelling subjects.

It is not uncommon for those who have led exemplary lives to be considered worthy of adulation in literature and film, as much as those with a surfeit of personal hardships. This was particularly true in the early era of filmmaking. “The Hollywood publicity machine worked overtime to create its stars, burying the most painful, brutal, and damaging parts of an actor’s life, while exaggerating or recreating, more uplifting experiences. This ritual defined the archetypal celebrity—a glamorous, wealthy figure who magically transcended social boundaries on the road to fame and fortune.” (Smith, Jr., 2009) Though many biopics choose to focus on the struggle that can accompany the life of a famed subject, other times the filmmaker chooses to leave out or downplay anything unflattering to the subject, or suggests weakness. As is more closely examined later in this analysis, Ray Charles, though blind and susceptible to abuse socially and financially, is shown as outsmarting those around him and easily capable of learning how to stand up and care for himself.

While this genre has received praise from “inner-industry” awards and from popular/mass media, it has, for the most part, been neglected in academic scholarship. Much of the existing literature concerned with biographical films has been within the framework of music studies or historical film studies, as demonstrated in the previous literature review. Only in the last two decades has there been much published about the popular music biopic. One reason for the lack of academic attention to the genre is the “relatively short and intermittent history.” (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007) Current pop music has only been around for a short period of time and many of the performers are still alive and well...”well enough to issue writs or threaten to sue.” (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007)

There may be “sound legal reasons for studios seeking to steer clear of potentially sensitive and litigious scenarios.” (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007) The biopic can potentially fall victim to being a surface level version of a life-story, barely scratching the surface of what it is about the subject that is unique or interesting, made accessible to the masses; but it can also act as an astute statement to why the subject or subject’s narrative is important. “In contrast to the critical consensus that the musical biopic is a relatively safe middlebrow genre that is rarely innovative or sophisticated, close analyses show how structurally invested these films are in older genre conventions, translating them to more contemporary standards of style.” (Schlotterbeck, "Trying to find a heartbeat": Narrative music in the pop performer biopic, 2008).

Because of the aforementioned reasons, there is much to contemplate for filmmakers in this genre. The biographical film provides audiences with an instrument that not only observes common techniques in filmmaking, but also acts as a conduit for exposure of a potentially otherwise overlooked subject. Along with the risk of the film not making it through production and the ordinary problems that can arise in filmmaking, the biographical film is subject to its own set of obstacles. “Biopics ‘are mediated by a series of filters: studio style, ideological fashion, political and economic constraints, auteurist predilections, charismatic stars, cultural values, and so forth.” (Stam, 2000)

Others may view these depictions as exploitation in the worst form by producers who hope to gain at the expense of the film’s subject(s). Bernard Beck points out the possible soap opera elements that exist in biopic can have class snobbery or voyeurism as a motivating factor. “Depicting the misery of those who are not allowed to use their

peculiar gifts and satisfy their deepest urges can be seen as elitist propaganda.” (Beck, 2005)

There are several potential motivations to making a biographical film and this current study will inspect how these relate to mythmaking.

Popular Music Biopics

This project is chiefly concerned with the specific subset of biographical films based on subjects who achieved notoriety in the popular music arena. “Biographical films about musicians and composers are caught between several competing demands. They must confidently foster in their audiences recognition of their subjects as beings that are transcendent. That is, their subjects must be seen to be uniquely capable of rising above their often tawdry or at least ordinary circumstances to achieve the kind of lasting greatness that attends their memory long after death.” (Fairchild, 2013) The demands that accompany production of popular music biopics are not dissimilar to other biopics, but are also ridden with their own set of challenges. These challenges include: incorporating music into said film, overcoming the perception that pop music is a lesser art form, poor casting in terms of plausibility of subject’s representation, or too much knowledge already known or too little interest in a subject.

Popular music biopics are not only educators on the life of the specific film subject, but also inform audiences about the inner workings of the music industry and the specific challenges that are shared by musical entertainers.

It is easy to detect that in the earlier days of biographical filmmaking, most of the products concerned with music concentrated on classical artists and composers. It was more common in the 1950s and 1960s for a popular music artist to star in a film rather

than to be the subject of a film; this shifted as pop music became more widespread. “A new form of authenticity began to develop which emphasised popular music as a new form of popular art, expressing the same virtues as high art but in a more accessible medium.” (Marshall & Kongsgaard, 2012)

A major rumination of these particular films is how the subject’s music is utilized. “It is not just the films which, after all, utilize similar structural elements, cinematic conventions and narrative trajectories, but their musics, that are being assessed, compared and devalued. “ (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007)

For most consumers, the music produced by the subject in question is the primary reason for interest initially in the film. The music can regularly act as a principal character in the film. There are various ways this is accomplished and “each option offers a subtle variation on assumptions and experiences of historical and musical authenticity, especially in the modern recreation of old performances.” (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007) ““In the traditional pop performer biopic, music functions dramatically because of what it deprives the central character of, not what it enables him or her to express.” (Schlotterbeck, "Trying to find a heartbeat": *Narrative music in the pop performer biopic*, 2008) When considering which specific songs and, further, which versions of those songs to use the choice “is usually determined by issues to do with copyright, permissions, and the willingness of the subject’s record label to cooperate in the production and marketing of an accompanying soundtrack album.” (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007)

Popular music biopics provide specific cases in which to evaluate many important themes that other biopics may not. They are typically concerned with solo acts versus

bands/groups; this is most probably due to the complexities that can arise when creating a cinematic version of someone's life. If a film were to be concerned with multiple lives to evaluate versus one it is likely to encounter several problems. Potential complications that could arise include editing the length of the work to what is considered an acceptable time for feature films, unequal attention given to each member of the band, or ensuring each member's story or side was told. The film adaptation of the Broadway musical, *Jersey Boys*, is a recent example of a popular music biopic that was concerned with a band versus a solo act. In this film each band member trades off narrating a section of the film, and thus, all four perspectives are recognized by the film's end.

Biopics concerned with popular music entertainers can also act as an outlet to (re)introduce said entertainer and his/her music to audiences. This is likely to boost album sales of the subject's music. "In March 2006, one month after *Walk the Line* had opened in the UK, the HMV chain reported that its sales of Johnny Cash records had risen by 676 per cent; 17 of its top 20 country albums were Cash records, four of its top 30 music DVDs and three of its top 20 books were about Cash. Amazon too reported similar increases: at one point in February he had eight of its top 25 albums." (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007) "Following *Straight Outta Compton's* release, 10 N.W.A-related albums landed on the Billboard 200." (Newman, 2015)

While there may be tremendous similarities in regards to many of the aspects of the life in question, including: musical style, era of fame, upbringing, marital struggle, drug/substance abuse, arch of career and success, and ultimate redemption or demise, the

actual life of the subject can be drastically different. This will be further illustrated in the following sections that scrutinize specific films.

CHAPTER 5: THEORY

Authenticity

It is the intention of this analysis to explore common themes, techniques, methods, and objectives used in the three films scrutinized, and in biopics in general; and further, to assess how the accuracy and authenticity of the events portrayed are treated. To evaluate this intention, biographies and autobiographies written by or about the subject of these films were consumed. The specific texts in question include *Cash: The Autobiography* written by Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Brother Ray*” *Ray Charles’ Own Story* written by Ray Charles and David Ritz, and *Bobby Darin: A Life* written by Michael Starr. When evaluating the film interpretations versus the book interpretations, certain accounts accorded verbatim, while others varied. I believe these inconsistencies occurred for a variety of reasons, including presenting the subject in a more favorable or interesting way, failed memory by the author, or in case of Bobby Darin, lack of ability to consult with the film’s primary subject. Biopic filmmakers have their own agenda that may or may not align with the agenda of the authors of the written text; they also employ specific methods to achieve these agendas. “Filmmakers avail themselves of certain ‘strategies’ to call forth history, by way of particular procedures of aesthetics or marginal types of representation. Whatever the nature of these strategies, they always contain two concomitant variables: historicity and authenticity.” (Custen, 2000) “In one sense, the creators of biopics are like historians-faced with an abundance of data, they have to be highly selective in choosing what to put in and what to leave out...It may be that this [choice] might reflect the input of a historical consultant with a vested interest in promoting a particular version of events. Or it may be...that an over-zealous attention to

detail is less important, within the context of the film, than the evocation of a convincing atmosphere. Or it may be the result of poor research. Or it may simply be a mistake.”

(Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007) “However rigorously the approach (to historical investigation) there will always be a plurality of interpretation.” (Tosh, 1984) “The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy.” (Carr, 1962)

Charged with the task of delivering his/her best attempt at an authentic and accurate film portrayal, a filmmaker must contemplate many production considerations such as who to cast, where to film, how to present musical numbers (actor’s performance versus artist’s recorded material), and how to costume. They are also likely to use informative text on the screen after the opening credits and/or before the end credits, which can provide the audience with information that is capable of filling gaps in the stories that the film did not cover because of editing restrictions, or to establish authority. “When members of a viewing audience see the familiar phrase ‘based on a true story’ flash on the screen during the opening credit sequence, they tend to assume, rightly or wrongly, that the movie they are about to watch will deliver more significance than a pure fiction and will therefore require a heightened level of attentive engagement and respect.” (Niemi, 2006)

The information existent and available regarding biographical and historical film subjects can influence the audience’s perception of the film’s authenticity. “The chance to peek into the lives of the characters staged offers the opportunity to express a renewed opinion on events that are often already known, but on which is shed a new light.”

(Cucca, 2011) This is a much stronger consideration in post-studio era films, given the amount of information on a particular subject so readily available on television, in books, and on the Internet. In the current digital age, audiences have the ability, more than ever, to research the biographical subject before viewing the film to learn about his/her life story. This ability to research could lead one to judge the film's authenticity cautiously based on what he/she has learned about the subject. Therefore, the casting of each role in a biographical film is capable of greatly influencing how a film is received, as well as the opinions formed, confirmed, or challenged regarding the film's subject. "In this way the viewer is led to evaluate, justify or condemn certain actions on the basis of the conjectural background reconstructions of determined events we already know and that we are moved to re-evaluate in real life." (Cucca, 2011) "Viewers of the same movie will possess different levels of preparation and information, determined by their degree of involvement with the subject matter, and the personal and social contexts within which that involvement is enacted." (Tudor, 1974) If the level of similarity the actor/actress is thought to have with the person they are portraying is thought to be positive, then the film is more likely to be regarded as authentic. Interviews given with the actors, directors, and producers also impact the level of perceived authenticity of a film.

Audiences may also consider the involvement of the subject's family, friends, and colleagues when evaluating its authenticity. "Having people 'who were really there' involved in the film promises an insider's perspective able to provide insights unavailable elsewhere or undermine commonly held misconceptions." (Marshall & Kongsgaard, 2012)

Those seeking the most accurate and authentic film on a given subject commonly turn to documentary films. Documentaries, while sharing some characteristics of biopics, establish themselves as providing a greater “behind the scenes” glance at the object of their exploration. A documentary film is presented as a commentary of facts, and typically includes a large number of interviews with those relevant to the subject, as well as native video footage and photography, versus a biopic, which is presented as a narrative story. It is not unlikely for the subject in question to appear to in a documentary. Recent examples of popular music documentaries include: *Running Down A Dream*, based on the life and career of Tom Petty, and *History of the Eagles*, based on the collective and individual career(s) of The Eagles’ band members.

“We live in a world...in which people increasingly receive their ideas about the past from motion pictures and television...the chief source of historical knowledge for the bulk of the population.” (Rosenstone R. A., 2006) “Although not intended as historical records, these films-with their inconsistencies, contradictions, and uncertainties have the capacity to become histories.” (Inglis, Popular music and film, 2003) “There is clearly a tension between plot and historical authenticity which, if it cannot be resolved, might suggest that movies will continue to offer accounts of history, popular music’s history, that are manipulated, incomplete and partial, to audiences who, in the absence of any competing sources of information, are likely to accept the stories they tell at face value. After all fiction routinely masquerades as fact, and entertainment often doubles up as history.” (Inglis, Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic, 2007) “The biopic has an ambiguous relationship to truth as its truth is always constrained by

cinematic convention, collective understandings of history and ideologies of stardom.”
(Marshall & Kongsgaard, 2012)

The authenticity of the portrayal of the life in question in a biographical film is evaluated with consideration to the balance of the power the film can possess and the limitations it can encounter. “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.” (Benjamin, 1969) “Authenticity centers on being believable relative to a more or less explicit model, and the same time being original, that is not being an imitation of the model.” (Peterson, 1997) “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.” (Benjamin, 1969) “People’s experiences and memories are so subjective. It makes you wonder about the whole idea of ‘historical fact.’” (Cash & Carr, 1997) “Even though memory is tinged with subjectivity, it can still be regarded as authentic. The fact that the eyewitness was actually present at the time invests their recollections with authority and emotional power. This helps produce a kind of second-hand testimony that includes the audience as witnesses to reconstructed events and brings spectators closer to the past.” (Cook, 2004)

I believe another important consideration deals with not only the authenticity of the portrayal of the subject’s life on film, but also with whether the subject’s life and career were authentic - how synchronized the subject’s musical persona and personal lives were. “The audience’s intimacy with the star gives the illusion of knowing the truth

about what a star is really like. More importantly, once the celebrity is positioned as “authentic,” the values and ideologies the symbolizes also become “real” and culturally resonant.” (Myers, 2009) In country music, particularly, it is usually assumed that the performer is singing about his/her own life. This is less of a concern in the other genres of music. Music is thought to provide a glimpse into the artist’s life through the songs that they perform. This is especially true if the artist has also written the song.

Intertwined with a contemplation of authenticity is the issue of historical accuracy, and whether it is possible to be authentic without being accurate or accurate without being authentic. “Some films can be accurate, even meticulous, about historical detail, events, and personalities, yet totally lack any larger insight or truth about the past.” (Voeltz, 2010) To properly assess the historical accuracy of a given film a thorough and lengthy analysis of its own would be required. For the purposes of this study, I am concerned with how authenticity or historical believability affects overall aim of a film. “Authenticity per se is no guarantor of success; however meticulously researched, the numerous and isolated events of a person’s life may not easily lend themselves to a two-hour treatment which follows a linear sense of time and presents a plausible sequence of events within an attractive and accessible framework.” (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007) “In films, the way facts are apprehended take precedence over the facts themselves.” (Custen, 2000) “Movie makers, unlike historians, have no obligations to portray the past accurately, if the past is simply an opportunity for commercial exploitation and presentation, characters and events can be reinvented, or simply invented, to assist those objectives.” (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007)

Myth

History, as we know it, would not exist without the presence of myth. The events of the past cannot be changed; but the accounts of those events cannot escape the influence of myth. It is impossible to accurately know how anything has happened without one's own presence at the event, and as conflicting eyewitness testimonies demonstrate, even being present at an event cannot guarantee a complete picture of objective truth. Any retelling or recreation is destined for imperfection. Lost in these retellings is the aura of the instance, along with tangible elements such as scenery, noises, odors, textures, and flavors. Envisaging of past events has been frequently attempted through various forms, however. Those in the fields of visual and literature arts, specifically, have tasked themselves with the challenge of creating portrayals of events or lives, and bringing them to audiences through specific practices, but they can never truly accomplish a precise recounting. "All representations are historical and cultural. Whatever the efforts of anamnesis undertaken in the domains of art, literature or the historical sciences, neither words nor images will ever yield an exact representation of the past." (Custen, 2000) Theorist Walter Benjamin considers these ideas in his work "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," stating, "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." (Benjamin, 1969) He continues to expand his ideas declaring, "By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced." (Benjamin, 1969) Concerning the current analysis, biographical film audiences use their own

familiarities and opinions of the original life to translate their understanding of the reproduction.

“Re-tellings of history can never be pure, literal, or absolute.” (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007) Film naturally encounters the limitations that occur with any recreation. “Like a history book, a historical film, despite Hollywood’s desire for “realism,” is not a window onto the past but a construction of a past; like a history book, a film handles evidence from the past within a certain framework of possibilities and tradition of practice. For neither the writer of history nor the director of a film is historical literalism a possibility.” (Rosenstone R. , 1995) “The filmic text never represents a duplicate of reality, but rather transcribes the real through modalities such as scraps, exemplifications, rearrangements. It acts through metaphors, but also through realism, along an imaginary continuum that goes from reality to illusion, but which is always the result of a discourse, with contents evermore available to different reading levels.” (Cucca, 2011) “No matter how literal-minded a director might be, film cannot do more than point to the events of the past; at best, film can approximate historic moments, the things that were once said and done, but it cannot replicate them.” (Rosenstone R. , 1995)

As established, there is no entirely accurate way to represent or depict a subject’s life through mediums of replication, but each biographical film attempts to present the life-story of the subject as an instrument for interpreting. It is apparent myth exists as a way to decipher narratives, and through this deciphering one establishes his/her impression of what he/she believes to have transpired. “Myth is something, the meaning of which is not what it immediately appears. It affects us somehow, but if we want to

understand it clearly it has to be ‘deciphered.’” (Bychkov, 2012) For anything to possess meaning it needs to have association with something external of itself. All notions would exist inside a vacuum and quickly find irrelevance without this relationship. The value assigned is demonstrated and carried out with connotation, or second-order signification. Myth is simply devoid of meaning, without connotation.

For the purposes of the current essay, the myth/connotation relationship is made particularly demonstrable in the context of biographical films. The entire genre provides a supreme backdrop for investigation, but the three films under intense scrutiny will continue to act as vehicles to accomplish the objectives previously set forth. As thoroughly acknowledged previously, film can establish profound authority with its audience. “Screens are nowadays the main vehicles of contemporary myths; and cinematographic genres, through repetition and variations on themes, are widely recognized as the first instances of modern mass media mythmaking.” (Cucca, 2011) Those making the biographical film are the ones enacting the myth, but the viewer is the one consuming and interpreting it, and though there are common ways this is accomplished, each viewer uses his/her own set of ideals, experiences, and knowledge during this process, leaving each viewer with a unique interpretation of the story and the myth. The myth tells us much about the storyteller and the viewer. “According to Barthes, the special trick of myth is to present an ethos, ideology or set of values as if it were a natural condition of the world, when in fact its no more than another limited, man-made perspective. A myth doesn’t describe the natural state of the world, but expresses the intentions of its teller, be that a storyteller, priest, artist, journalist, filmmaker, designer or politician.” (Robinson, 2011)

At its most basic form, myth could be considered a presentation of a story for construal. So much of what myth represents is a reflection of what the audience desires to believe about a given story or individual. The viewer needs the myth to make sense of the story. This is perhaps no more evident than with the attempts made in historical and biographical filmmaking. The lives that are presented in biopics cannot be viewed as strictly narratives; regardless of the accuracy exhibited in these accounts, a myth has to be considered and activated. This is carried out in multiple ways. The film, and the life story within, uses myth to reveal meaning, but sustains mystery concurrently. “Art gives preference to its myths as a means of embracing history. It is communicated to us at a symbolic level, and not as something present, which is factual in nature. It is always written and received with a reassessment of meaning. It only communicates with, through, and in relation to this meaning.” (Bartholyens, 2000) “Interesting as they may be, facts could be delivered with chronicles and lists of data. If facts were the aim, we would have no need of the literary form of the biography as it developed for over two millennia.” (Rosenstone R. A., 2006) “Actual facts can be converted into myth by being isolated from their historical context and transferred to a symbolic one.” (Dahlhaus, 1991) Biographical films attempt to engage the realities that accompany a life, while simultaneously presenting a unique and interesting narrative that elicits interest in the viewer. With this agenda in mind, filmmakers activate myth. “It is understandable that certain structures might dominate storytelling...The metaphor at work is one that bridges the physical act of traveling a path and the abstract understanding of progress towards goals and fulfillment of a purposeful life.” (Reidy, 2010) “Biographical films about musicians and composers are often caught between the recognition of their subjects as

myths and the perceived experience of them as human beings. Many such films resolve the tension between these two cultural formations by creating characters that are both larger than life and simultaneously all too human, carefully resolving any tension between the two.” (Fairchild, 2013)

One of the most important deliberations in considering myth’s role in biographical films is the notion of celebrity. Celebrities cannot avoid existing as mythical characters, due to the public persona that fame creates. “It is, in part, the blurring of the boundaries between private and public or the idea of an authentic individual behind the public persona that makes celebrity images particularly potent ideological symbols.” (Myers, 2009) “The star must come to terms with her dual identity as a private person and a public performer.” (Schlotterbeck, "Trying to find a heartbeat": Narrative music in the pop performer biopic, 2008) “There are two realities of film stars proffered in the public sphere: their representations in films, where the heroes they portray are fixed images, and thus relatively fixed conceptions of their identity can be made; and, in contrast, their supposed ‘real lives,’ the private and intimate as well as the various public lives.” (Marshall P. D., 1997) “Persona is the mythical mask worn by an individual who assumes a character that exists separately from his or her “real” self.” The persona transcends reality, becoming an archetype for human experiences, ideas, and even myths.” (Ware & Linkugel, 1982) “We can never really know the truth about a celebrity, as it is a highly constructed position, the pursuit of [that] truth allows audiences to organize and understand themselves and the world around them.” (Myers, 2009)

Since biographical films attempt to transport the viewer to a specific era, the

construction of this era becomes a vital component of the film and many considerations related to the production of these films are contemplated with this in mind. The presentation of the story defines and presents the myth. One impetus behind making a biopic is presenting a life story that is compelling and entertaining, therefore the myths that already exist are revived.

“In common ordinary usage, to engage in myth making suggests falsification, factual inaccuracies, and the like. However, from another vantage point, myths are not necessarily lies, they are explications. These narratives extracted from history perform a symbolic function essential to the culture that produced them. Myths, in this sense, are useful parables and allegories containing lessons for today. They help to explain the world.” (Horne, 1993)

Myths should also be considered in terms of how they relate to the cultural and societal circumstances of the audience. “Myths are a reflection of who we are as a society,” (Pileggi, Grabe, Holderman, & de Montigny, 2000) “or refer to stories shared by members of a society.” (Cucca, 2011) “Narratives express the rituals, the institutions, and values of a society. Originally transmitted orally and then through media, myths have been incorporated into popular culture and have come down to our days.” (Cucca, 2011) Myth contains both universal and culturally specific themes for a particular society. “Every epoch develops its own way to tell its myths and its heroes.” (Cucca, 2011) Myths “supply answers to a culture’s most fundamental questions and provide meaning, identification, and mutual understanding.” (DeSantis, 1998) The three films evaluated in this analysis relate, specifically, to American culture. Many of the themes addressed and myths executed in these selected films are based around those of American ideals, and the American dream. Myths become so ingrained in viewers that they influence several aspects in American society; specifically, myths are responsible for building war heroes,

politicians, actors, musicians, and sports stars. Films “rearticulate the cultural narrative that define the American nation. They recover a different meaning for the past, a message that will validate the increasingly hybrid and poly-cultural reality of American life.” (Burgoyne, 2010) The myths constructed in biographical films provide the viewer with a means to relate him/herself to the film’s subject in the context of a shared cultural experience.

The current analysis of myth and mythmaking in biographical films will borrow from the work of the foremost theorist on myth related to the themes at hand, Roland Barthes. Barthes popularized his ideas on myth with his work, *Mythologies*, and more specifically, “Myth Today.” Barthes sets up his overall ideas on myth declaring, “Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates...It is a kind of ideal servant: it prepares all things, brings them, lays them out, the master arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from.” (Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1972)

Every myth can be considered separately, though all can be argued to represent the same agenda in biographical films. One shared objective that can be argued is the need for myth to strip history from the object. This can be accomplished as Barthes expresses, “precisely because they are historical that history can very easily suppress them.” (Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1972)

“According to Barthes, someone who consumes a myth...does not see its construction as a myth. They see the image simply as the presence of the essence it signifies. They are then convinced that what they’ve seen is a fact, a reality, even an experience – as if they’d actually lived it. It is this kind of reader who reveals the

ideological function of myth.” (Robinson, 2011) Biographical films present an idealized version of the subject’s life and experiences that create the most compelling story; therefore, the biographical film format, intrinsically, operates like a myth because it requires a dramatic story arc. Audiences may find the dramatizations rendered in biographical films to be convincing due to the romanticized interpretation constructed by set design, costuming, casting, all of which potentially imitates many aspects of a historical ‘reality.’

Barthes articulates, “Everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message.” (Barthes, *Myth Today*, 1972) Biographical films display myth not simply through the specific life portrayed and the version of the story that is told, but by how the filmmakers use production choices to turn said life-story into a filmic presentation. Even the unseen film crew is part of this myth construction. Myth is constructed in these films by various common practices that will be thoroughly examined later in the textual analysis of the three films analyzed.

“All known cultures utilize signs to convey relatively simple messages swiftly and conveniently. Signs may depend for their meanings upon their form, setting, colour, or location.” (Bychkov, 2012) All of these are frequently used in biographical films.

The other noted theorist on modern myth studies is Claude Levi-Strauss. As Wendy Doniger pointed out about Levi-Strauss in her introduction to his work “Myth and Meaning, “He has always been interested in the messiest, juiciest aspects of human culture-eating and killing and marrying. Indeed, he is the one who taught us that every myth is driven by the obsessive need to solve a paradox that cannot be solved.” (Doniger,

1995) Levi-Strauss puts an emphasis on how myths are organized, and the effect this organization has on how a myth is received. “It is impossible to understand a myth as a continuous sequence. This is why we should be aware that if we try to read a myth as we read a novel or a newspaper article, that is line after line, reading from left to right, we don't understand the myth, because we have to apprehend it as a totality and discover that the basic meaning of the myth is not conveyed by the sequence of events but - if I may say so - by bundles of events even although these events appear at different moments in the story.” (Levi-Strauss, 1979) Myth is capable of transforming both the viewer, and also, the text. The text is vulnerable to how myth can alter many elements including presentation, production, language, visuals, etc. The viewer, of course, is transformed because myth exists and has been presented to him/her. “Myths get thought in man unbeknownst to him.” (Levi-Strauss, 1979)

The myths that are explored in biographical films are not new; they are just given new presentations. “Each telling of a myth draws upon [these] rags and bones, and each piece has its own previous life-history that it brings into the story.” (Doniger, 1995) “From its inception, Hollywood has been in the business of construction and reinvention, fabricating or reshaping a star’s past to fit an ideal image.” (Smith, Jr., 2009) “Invention, interpretation, and imagination are unavoidable traits of historical analysis.” (Inglis, Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic, 2007) Many critics charge biopics and historical films would be nothing without alteration, compression, invention, and metaphor. (Rosenstone R. , 1995)

The matter of how myth is constructed in relation to the presentation of a biography, onscreen or off, is covered in Brent Reidy’s work, “Our Memory of What

Happened Is Not What Happened: Cage, Metaphor, and Myth.” Reidy surveys a specific case study of John Cage and how Cage, himself, was delinquent in his remembrance of actual events in his own life. He asks why the myth attained prominence and ponders why Cage remembered his life in a certain way through his storytelling. Many of the themes that are put forth in his analysis can be borrowed to help construct the research of the current thesis. “This essay is not concerned directly with the myth and its disortion. It instead asks why the myth attained prominence and why it is still persuasive. It asks why schloars remember Cage this way and why Cage remembered his life this way in his storytelling.” (Reidy, 2010)

“Our memory of what happened is not what happened. This is true of Cage and of all stories. We understand our world through metaphor and myth....But metaphor is not fundamentally detrimental to understanding. Metaphor creates understanding.” (Reidy, 2010) Metaphor is not merely a way of relating two things but that it forms the basis of our cognition of those things in the first place. (Lakoff & Johson, 1980) “Myths are more than tales. Myths are idealized remembrances of actual fact that better represent a person, event, or story.” (Reidy, 2010) “We must also hold on to our mythology, metaphors, and misremembrances because they tell us as much about what Cage’s music means as do facts. Understanding Cage requires knowledge of the truth alongside faith in the mythlogical.” (Reidy, 2010) “Myth does not point to a fact; myth points beyond facts to something that informs the fact.” (Campbell, 1989)

“Cage knew that his memory of what happened is not what happened. Yet he continued to remember it and live it that way for the sake of his own beliefs...Cage’s story is remembered in a way nearly all hero stories are remembered. Certain incidents

are amplified and facts ignored to fit Cage into this archetype that dominates human storytelling. It is therefore not a surprise he is remembered as he chose to be.” (Reidy, 2010) The following textual analysis will draw on these ideas as I examine how myth is constructed in the selected films.

CHAPTER 6: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Childhood Struggles

As previously mentioned, it is familiar in biopics for the subject to experience a less than ideal childhood. The films chosen for this study are exemplary case studies of this and will spotlight the similarities between the subjects' formative years as portrayed in these films.

It is depicted in *Walk The Line* that Johnny Cash was born into abject poverty. The film offers scenes of the entire Cash family in the fields, picking cotton, even when J.R. (as his family calls him) was a small boy of only four or five years old. His parents are shown fighting often and do not spare the children, including J.R., from witnessing their arguments. Mrs. Cash is shown as a very pious woman and deals with her lot in life by relying on her faith and imparting it to her children. Scenes depict her singing spirituals while toiling in the cotton fields and J. R. joining in to sing with her.

The first flashback in the film is to '1944 Dyess, Arkansas,' in which it is revealed that J.R. and his older brother, Jack, are very close; this is shown in scenes where the brothers share a bedroom and stay up late talking about their future lives. In this scene, J.R. tells Jack he admires him very much because he is "so good," and is, in fact, planning on becoming a preacher when he is older, J.R., on the other hand, tells Jack he is more interested in singing at church and Jack notes that J.R. knows, "every song in the hymnal," to which J.R. replies that it is easy for him to learn.

J.R. is also shown to spend a lot of his time listening to country music, including the Carter family, on the radio. Their father frowns upon this behavior and he is shown to favor Jack over J.R. Many scenes portray him yelling at J.R. to turn his music off.

The film includes scenes of a family tragedy when Jack is killed in a wood cutting accident, and shows him dying in the presence of family members, including J. R. The next scene shows Mr. Cash turning to alcohol and becoming abusive. In one scene he drunkenly yells at J.R. and tells him, “you are nothing” and that “God took the wrong son.” He is never portrayed as encouraging J.R.’s love of music and after Jack’s death he becomes increasingly unsupportive. In a following scene, an older J.R. is shown leaving home to enter the Air Force, Mrs. Cash encourages him and his love of music by giving him her hymnal.

The death of his brother is shown as affecting Cash throughout his entire life. It haunts him, and manifests in his emotions, shaping every relationship during his life. He is depicted as having feelings of guilt, shown through flashbacks, that he lived instead of Jack and this is especially enhanced by his addictive and abusive behavior, shown later in the film.

In the film, *Ray*, Ray Charles is depicted experiencing a similar traumatic event, being small boy, around six or seven years old, watching his brother as he drowns in a washtub right in front of him. Ray is shown living with only with his mother and his brother, so this loss is especially profound for their family. Scenes reveal that Ray begins to lose his eyesight a short time after this tragedy, leaving the lasting image of his brother’s drowning as one of the final significant events that he remembers seeing. In one scene in the film, Ray’s mother runs out screaming, “Why didn’t you call me?” Much like the Cash tragedy, though no one’s fault, Ray is shown assuming the burden of the event. He is shown many times dreaming of this event in imaginary sequences and sometimes imagines gushing water in places it is not, including a scene early in the film

when fumbling around in his suitcase he imagines touching water and the arm of a small child, this startles him and he jumps backwards almost falling down before realizing it is a hallucination.

The Charles family, like the Cash family, is also portrayed enduring substantial economic hardships. Ray's mother tried to support the family on her own and scenes show her working a job as a wash lady. Ray and his mother are demonstrated to be very close and when he begins to lose his eyesight, she encourages him to do things for himself. The ideology of the film via scenes of his mother teaching him to do things for himself, such as the one in which she lets him fumble around the house looking for a cricket relying on his hearing, implies that it is because she instills an independent spirit in him during these developmental years that he is later able to thrive in the world, specifically navigating the music industry, including the perils that can accompany the touring life of a musician.

In the film, *Beyond The Sea*, the audience learns early on that Bobby Darin grew up without his father, who died shortly before he was born. Bobby is told that his father was a cabinetmaker turned businessman, but when Bobby begins to doubt this story, his mother reveals to him that, in fact, his father was a gangster. Bobby wonders about the father he never knew for the rest of his life.

A young Bobby is shown receiving a diagnosis of rheumatic fever, which yields a serious heart condition. In the next scene, Bobby overhears the doctor tell his mother that he probably won't live past 15. It is exhibited that he is afflicted with this malady his entire life and it ultimately takes his life, though well past when expected. A major

theme portrayed in the film concerns how he found inspiration in the fact that he was living on borrowed time and it pushed him to achieve more than others at an earlier age.

His mother is portrayed as his whole world, and the one that gives him his first taste of music. It is explained that she has a background in Vaudeville and frequently plays the piano around the house. A voiceover narration from Bobby says, “mama was right about music, it opened a whole new world that I could live in outside of time and illness.”

The film shows Bobby to have an older sister, Nina, who is significantly older than him; she marries a man named Charlie, with whom Bobby becomes almost inseparable. Charlie is demonstrated acting as a father figure role in Bobby’s life, and Charlie is the one that has bought the family a piano so that Bobby could learn how to play. Bobby is shown as learning multiple instruments and Bobby’s voiceover remarks, “from then on, music was my life.”

All three subjects are shown suffering great loss in their respected childhood years. Ray Charles and Johnny Cash are both depicted experiencing the death of a sibling (a brother in both cases), with whom they were very close. The pain felt from these events haunted these men throughout their lives and such was portrayed in each film through emotional flashbacks. Bobby Darin did not endure the loss of a sibling, but is portrayed as suffering pain from not knowing his father, who had passed away before he was born. All three films show how close each of these men, boys at the time, were with their mother, especially in the case of Bobby Darin due to the absence of his father.

Additionally, each film painted a look into the financial hardships that the families of each subject faced. None of the three families in said films is shown to

experience financial comfort. In the cases of Johnny Cash and Ray Charles, the families were portrayed as outright destitute. Bobby Darin's childhood is not portrayed as quite so deprived, but his financial situation is addressed in a scene where driving by a poster of Frank Sinatra he states "when you come from nothing like him (pointing at poster) and us (pointing to himself) you have to make something of yourself." These privations are illustrated as inspiring these men in their professional endeavors within the entertainment industry. They are shown to drive each man to pursue fame and fortune and rise above the environments in which they were born and raised.

Overcoming a troubled childhood is a nearly universal theme in biographical films, and is even more likely to be present in biopics concerning musical entertainers, such as the ones scrutinized in this essay. Films oftentimes use images on the screen to "induce audience sympathy for both protagonists by introducing characters so seemingly deprived and disadvantaged that the audience cannot help but applaud as they move far beyond their meager beginnings." (Smith, Jr., 2009) The struggles of financial strife, physical ailments/handicaps, loss of a family member, strained relationships with other family members, or numerous other complications during one's formative years provide motivation to succeed in a chosen field and better his/her life from the one he/she has experienced.

The myths dealing with the formative years of these men that are activated in these texts confirm those that are utilized in many films within the larger biographical film genre. The loss these men suffered as children is established as the definitive moment of each subject's childhood. Due to these sufferings, each subject became remarkably close with his mother. The portrayal of each of these women is almost

saintly. The myth of a musician's (especially a male musician) mother as his/her earliest and main supporter is represented in these films. Each of the biographies or autobiographies consumed for research exposed a more extensive picture. In *Walk The Line*, Cash's father is portrayed as blaming Johnny for his brother Jack's death and disapproving of Johnny in general, specifically his interest in music. In the book, however, Cash mentions that though his father did disapprove of his interest in music and would tell him to turn his radio off, he never mentions that his father blamed him for the death of his brother; instead he states that the whole family took it hard. This film portrayal of an abusive and disapproving father is coupled with the implication that Cash turned to his mother for support and encouragement. In *Brother Ray*, Charles tells of how in addition to his biological mother, his father's first wife also looked after him, and he even called her "mother." He describes how his biological mother allowed him to make his own mistakes and roam, while "mother" was much more protective of him. The book also reveals that while his father wasn't around often, Ray did know him in a limited capacity. The film *Ray* makes no mention of "mother" and shows Charles as never knowing his father in any capacity. Bobby Darin's mother was also portrayed to be the most important person in his early life in *Beyond The Sea*. In Michael Starr's biography of Darin, he affirms many of the ideas that are represented in the portrayal of Darin's mother in the film, however, he expresses that in addition to her support of Darin and his musical aspirations, she was also addicted to morphine as a result of dental work. This negative trait of Darin's mother is never mentioned in film, thus implying that the image of flawless mother who provides Darin a support system for overcoming his physical ailments is maintained.

These film omissions and alterations produce depictions that enforce the myth that the role of a mother is the most important and potentially only relationship in the early of life of a musician. All of the three films analyzed downplayed any negative qualities these women may have possessed and emphasized the importance of this relationship in each young man's life. The mother's roles in these films were painted as the relationship that provided each subject with the strength he needed to overcome his sadness, handicap, ailment, or other adversity.

First Marriage and Early Career

Another common theme in most popular music biopics is a strained romantic relationship between the protagonist and his/her significant other, typically and specifically, a first spouse. The addressed three films provide excellent examples of this.

Early in *Walk The Line*, Johnny Cash is shown talking on the phone to his girlfriend, Vivian, back in the U.S. while he is stationed in the Air Force overseas confessing to her that he wants to marry her. It is later shown that she becomes his wife. The film portrays their early life as husband and wife as being difficult as it situates the couple in Memphis, 1955, with Cash working as a door-to-door salesman and Vivian raising their first child, Roseanne. When they receive an eviction notice from their landlord, Vivian is shown urging Johnny to quit pursuing a career in music and get a "real job." This scene echoes the treatment Cash received as a young man from his father regarding his interest in music.

While living in Memphis, Cash is shown stopping by Sun Studio and seeing a recording session taking place. It is strongly implied that this session is for Elvis Presley. It is portrayed that Cash was inspired watching this session and he then goes home to

work on his (gospel) music with his band. He is shown returning to the studio and asks the owner, Sam Phillips, for an audition, to which Phillips tells him to set up an appointment with his secretary, and so Cash does. When he returns for the audition, Cash and his band are shown dressed in all black outfits and they say it is because it is the only color shirt they all owned. They are shown performing a gospel song for Phillips, to which he replies that he cannot market gospel music, because it does not sell well, and tells Cash that there is no conviction in his voice and then proceeds to ask him to play something that makes him believe Cash. It is illustrated that he takes the directive and launches into a rendition of "Folsom County Blues." Phillips is shown recording the song that night. This moment shown to be a turning point for Cash and one that jumpstarts his career.

After signing with Sam Phillips and Sun Records, Johnny Cash is shown going on tour with other Sun Records artists, including Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Roy Orbison. Things at home are depicted as being very unstable between Johnny and Vivian and they begin to fight quite a bit when he is at home due to the hard living he is doing on the road. It is portrayed that also during this time, he encounters June Carter when playing a show in Texarkana with Jerry Lee Lewis. They are shown sharing an honest moment when he tells her that he has listened to her all of his life and she replies that she doesn't feel like she is a great singer and therefore learned to be funny. He is shown opening up to her about the death of his brother for the first time and realizes that he is developing feelings for her though he is still married to Vivian.

Cash's portrayed behavior, in the early years of his music career, foreshadows the impact that fame will have on his relationship and personality.

Not much is shown of Ray Charles' early relationships with women in the film, *Ray*. He is, however, shown to take up with a couple of women during his struggling years before meeting his wife, Bea, including a promoter named Marlene, whom he begins living with while she manages his career.

The early stages in his career are depicted as representing a time in which he experienced discrimination due to his handicap and race. Marlene and others around him are shown manipulating Ray. There is much attention in the film paid to how he is cast off and harassed, often due to his blindness; it is shown that he becomes paranoid that everyone is taking advantage of him, and even goes as far as to ask to be paid in one-dollar bills so he would not get screwed out of the payment like he had been in the past.

Beyond The Sea portrays that when Bobby Darin was young, though he was sickly, he would muster the strength to practice all his instruments with his mother. The film reiterates frequently that she had a plan for Bobby and she repeatedly emphasized that he needed to have "it." She is portrayed as having a tremendous belief in him and his talents. Darin is depicted using this encouragement, along with his sense of living on 'borrowed time,' to push past the challenges he was given and focus on using his talents to achieve popularity, achievement, fame, and wealth.

In *Beyond The Sea*, it is presented that Bobby Darin, unlike Ray Charles and Johnny Cash, did not marry until after he accomplished considerable fame. Darin is shown marrying after his musical career has started to flourish and he has begun an acting career. Scenes reveal that on the set of his first feature film role, he meets the young actress, Sandra Dee, a co-star in the film and woos her into falling in love with

him and eventually marrying him. This courtship is presented to the audience through a montage of scenes set to Darin's song and the film's namesake, "Beyond The Sea."

As Darin's career progresses, the strain on their marriage is revealed, especially in regards to the fact that they are both now working as actors. Acting is his secondary career, behind his music career, and scenes suggest Sandra becomes resentful of his success as an actor, since she herself is struggling to be taken earnestly as an actress. Their issues come to a head in a scene in which Darin is nominated for an Academy Award. It is shown that he does not win, and takes out his frustration on Sandra, who in turn, reciprocates annoyance towards him and an argument ensues. They are shown quickly making up.

All three films under scrutiny present each subject as having endured immense struggles when launching his career. All three subjects are shown experiencing rejection and having to adapt to limitations, Ray Charles with his blindness, Bobby Darin with his heart condition, and Johnny Cash with his responsibility for the family he had to support. The arc of most popular music biopics includes a segment of the film where the subject is shown "paying his dues." The scenes are extremely critical for the idea that these subjects are taken advantage of by record labels, promoters, managers, and other music industry professionals. The audience expects to see a story in these films where the success that is ultimately achieved by a subject is first met with resistance, and overcoming these challenges feeds the underdog to hero myth that is prevalent in biographical films.

These films also provide a glimpse into the courtships and subsequent (first) marriages of each man. In the case of Johnny Cash in *Walk The Line*, he is shown

marrying extremely young before he has even started his musical career. In *Ray*, Ray Charles has experienced mild success when he is shown meeting his wife, Bea. In *Beyond The Sea*, Bobby Darin is shown wooing a young Sandra Dee while making his first feature film. Each subject is shown as having problems in his marriage nearly from the onset. By establishing early in the films the problems existent in these relationships, filmmakers foreshadow the troubles that are later experienced by the couples. The portrayals of these relationships also provide the foundation for myths associated with the difficulties of being romantically involved with musicians, as well as the myth that a musician's first spouse is the one who carries on the role established by the musician's mother at an early age, of someone who provides the musician stability and encouragement to pursue his/her dreams and aspirations.

In his autobiography, *Brother Ray*, Ray Charles writes of a long-term relationship that began when he was 17, during the time he started getting traction with his music, with a young woman named, Louise. He writes that Louise and he planned to get married and that they had a child together. He continues that shortly after he ended his relationship with Louise, he married a woman named Eileen; this marriage lasted roughly a year. Neither of these relationships are addressed in the film, *Ray*. In *Ray*, it is portrayed that Charles' first meaningful relationship is with Della "B" and she is shown as the first woman that he weds.

In Michael Starr's biography of Bobby Darin, he writes that Darin, like Ray Charles, had a long-term relationship when he was very young and establishing his music career. Starr writes that Darin's relationship was with singer, Connie Francis, and proclaims that Darin and Francis planned on getting married, but her father did not

approve of the union. The Darin/Francis relationship is never mentioned in the film, *Beyond The Sea*. The first romantic relationship that Bobby Darin is shown to have is with Sandra Dee, who becomes his first (and only) wife.

Establishing these subjects as having a first spouse who is supportive through the difficult times of launching a musical career is in accordance with the myths that biographical filmmakers tend to favor. These filmmakers often look for the romantic relationship that tends to be the most definitive during the subject's lifespan as the one in which to give concentration. This relationship is also the one that typically provides the setup for the adultery that many musicians are likely to perform.

Success and The Hardships of Stardom

(Sex, Drugs, and Rock N' Roll)

Every popular music biopic produced is concerned with a subject that has reached a level of fame that makes him/her worthy of being embodied in a theatrical account. If the life in question had not reached said level of fame, it is unlikely those making the films would believe the film could find an audience broad enough to justify producing the film. Portrayal of this rise to fame and subsequent success is crucial to any popular music biopic.

Early in his career, Johnny Cash is shown placed on tour with Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Roy Orbison. It is during this tour that he is shown trying drugs and being unfaithful to his wife for the first time. Though he was unfaithful to Vivian with many women, he is portrayed in being specifically interested in June Carter, and while they are out on tour together after connecting with her on a personal level, he attempts to get physical with her. A few scenes later, Cash and Carter go fishing while on tour, and

then sing a duet on stage. During this performance, he is shown kissing her on the cheek and she storms off the stage. In the next scene, Cash loses his temper backstage after the show and rips a sink out of the wall, suggesting how strong his feelings were for her. Carter is portrayed as being angry with all the male performers on the tour because they are always drinking. In one scene she says, "You can't walk in a line." The next scene shows Cash in the studio recording "I Walk The Line." The film uses this song as the soundtrack to a montage scene to move the story along with scenes of June getting married to her second husband, Cash selling his house and buying another one with Vivian, signing a deal with Records for a million dollars, and continuing to achieve success in his music career.

Cash is shown losing touch with June for awhile after her remarriage, but later running into her at an industry awards show. They are later shown forming a duo and going on tour together, and during this tour it is suggested that they sleep together.

Fame is shown putting a strain on Bobby Darin's relationships with his wife and sister in *Beyond The Sea*. He is shown fighting in one scene with his sister because she does not like the seats she is given for his show at the Copacabana. Later, he is shown wanting to have control over his wife, Sandra, and her career and declares in one scene that he wants her to stop making movies and go on the road with him, to which she responds with angrily reminding him she is an actress and has her own career. A voiceover informs the audience that Sandra and Bobby made a couple of movies together that were duds and as the music scene changed, Bobby and his music were considered irrelevant. The film illustrates that due to the sea change in the music industry, he found himself turning to political and protest music, and along with this change in style of

music, he also changed the way he dressed and grew a mustache to fit in with the counter-culture crowd. Scenes reveal Darin turned to politics and began writing more political type songs, which also caused a lot of friction with Sandra, and they ultimately separated.

Along with the marital and career obstacles he faced, Bobby Darin is also depicted as enduring personal problems during this time in his life; the physical limitations that had plagued him as a child came back to ail him and he had to undergo open heart surgery to replace his heart valves. His much older sister Nina is shown paying a visit to Bobby to inform him that she is not his sister, but actually his mother, having had him out of wedlock as a teen. She explains that the woman he perceived as his mother, Polly was in fact his grandmother and that Polly agreed to raise Bobby as hers. Bobby is shown breaking down upon learning this news, destroying his house, packing up his awards, records, clothes, toupees, etc. and donating them to charity.

Ray Charles is portrayed in *Ray* as struggling early in his musical career due to his handicap and race. As the film progresses, he is shown overcoming these obstacles because of his belief in his music and sheer will to succeed. He is shown initially signing with Atlantic Records and then after a period of wild success, he signs a better contract with ABC Records. It is also during this time that he is depicted as being unfaithful to his wife on tour with multiple background singers, including one that he impregnates. The film also shows Charles developing an intense addiction to heroin that puts a rift between him and everyone he knows.

Musicians turning to drugs, alcohol, extramarital relationships, anger, and/or vanity, as a result of achieving fame, are common topics covered in popular music

biopics. In each film evaluated in the current text, these themes are present. This portrayal of debauched behavior can lead to the myth of fame's responsibility of turning these subjects to a life of immoralities, or can also suggest the notion that because these subjects were capable of this behavior they were able to make more compelling music/art and, therefore, have a successful music career.

Comeback And Redemption

In *Walk the Line*, after years of drug and alcohol abuse on the road accompanied by cancelled tours, arrests, physical collapses and other hardships, Johnny Cash is shown finally straightening out his life and returning his music career to prominence. It is portrayed that his musical comeback occurs when he records and releases the album, *Folsom Prison Blues*. Cash is portrayed throughout the entire film as trying to gain his father's approval, and it is shown during one of the last scenes of the movies that his father visits him and his children and everyone appears to be in harmony.

In *Beyond The Sea*, the audience receives a glimpse of the positive things that began to happen at the end of Bobby Darin's life, as he is shown returning to playing nightclubs, because he knows it's what he does best and what he is best at doing. The film alludes to reconciliation between him and Nina, and he comes to accept, and even publicly acknowledge, her as his mother. This is demonstrated in a scene where he is playing the Copacabana.

In *Ray*, Ray Charles is depicted as being encouraged by his wife to stop using heroin. She is shown telling him that if he doesn't stop using he will lose his music and her. Scenes show him going to rehab and going through painful withdrawals. While he is in rehab, it is portrayed that as he gets sober he has a vision of his mother and brother.

In this vision, his mother tells him that he only became crippled when he started using drugs, and his brother tells him it wasn't his fault for the drowning accident.

“In these films...the redemption story arc rests on the convention that characters are encouraged and celebrated for their talents and individual accomplishments before buckling to personal or public pressure and the private and/or public resentments that follow.” (Doyle, 2006) The subjects of these films experience many trials and tribulations as part of their story; they get caught up in power, drugs, sex, etc. before they overcome them. “These subjects “labor to be accepted into the community of chosen profession, initially ignored, then tolerated, and then ultimately triumphant.” (Custen, 2000) “Redemption, then, is a right of passage for celebrities seeking to reinvent themselves, and their careers, in the wake of public disfavor.” (Smith, Jr., 2009)

Common Techniques Used In Each Of The Three Films

The filmmakers of each of the three films under scrutiny utilize several similar methods and approaches to communicate a version of the life of his subject. Many of these methods are also common practices of the larger biopic genre.

One of the most common conventions of the biographical film genre is the use of flashbacks. All three of these films open with the subjects as adults. In *Walk The Line* the film opens with Johnny Cash in a backstage area at the Folsom County Prison in 1968 staring at a saw as he prepares to perform. The camera focuses on the saw as Cash stares at it and touches it. The next scene is a flashback to his youth that converges on the death of his brother, Jack, who was victim to a fatal sawing accident. In *Ray* the film opens with Ray Charles standing waiting for a bus in a gas station parking lot, bus ticket in hand. The next scene is then a flashback to Charles getting hired to play in a country

band some years earlier. The first scene of *Beyond The Sea* shows Bobby Darin preparing for a tenth anniversary performance at the Copacabana. In this scene, Darin stops the band playing the song because he sees a little boy on the side of the stage. It is ambiguous if the boy is really there or imaginary. It is suggested that he is on the set of a film he making about his own life. A reporter states to Darin that no one has ever done anything like this, putting their own life on film. The man with Darin (later revealed to be his brother-in-law) interjects and says, "Sure they have; it's a self portrait." The reporter then retorts, "do you think you can really be objective about your own life?" Darin's brother-in-law replies, "this guy was raised to always tell the truth, so that's what he's doing." Darin simply walks away. The reporter says that Darin is too old to play the part to which his brother-in-law responds that he (Darin) was born to play the part. The next scene then flashes back to Darin's childhood neighborhood.

Flash-forwards are also commonly used in these films, especially when the film has flashed back in time and needs to jump to a later time seamlessly. An example of this in *Walk The Line* is the flashback of Johnny leaving home to join the military. When the scene ends, the film flashes to Germany 1952 and shows him in a music store - it does not return to a scene in 1968 in order just to flashback to 1952. The flash-forwards used in *Ray* are also what typically pull the action back from the flashbacks. When, throughout the film, the scene shifts to him as a young child with his mother, the next scene is always chronologically later than the scene pre-flashback had been, the same is true for *Beyond The Sea*.

A voiceover is used often in these films to provide a narration of the events on the screen. Typically this voice is the voice of the protagonist. This is mostly commonly

used to interject details and fill in particulars to the storyline as needed. Voiceovers are occasionally used in conjunctions with montage scenes. The respected subject's songbook is used in each of the three films as music to background these montage scenes. All three films show the subject's rise to fame set against the backdrop of a musical montage.

Another commonality of the films examined is the conclusion. In *Beyond The Sea*, text flashes on the screen for the updates and accomplishments of all the central characters (Steve Blamer/Darin's manager; Nina/Darin's real mother/sister; Charlie/Darin's brother-in-law/stepfather; Dodd/Darin's son; Sandra Dee/Darin's wife; and Bobby Darin, himself). Text also informs the audience that the film was written, directed, produced, and starring Kevin Spacey, also that Kevin Spacey performed all the music. Both *Ray* and *Walk The Line* also use informative text on the screen before the credits start to provide the audience with insight of the subject's later career that is not covered in the film.

These shared techniques, along with the common themes used in the selected biographical films provide a means to examine how authenticity is handled and mythmaking is carried out in this genre. Every biographical film subject can be thought of as mythical. The arc of these lives, and therefore these films, is itself a myth. The troubled childhood, strained relationships, financial struggles, difficulties with the music industry, drug addictions, adulterous behavior, rise to stardom, fall from prominence, and ultimate redemption or comeback are considered the prevalent themes that these techniques act to accentuate.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

The biographical film genre has become a very trendy and adored one in recent decades. Due to its popularity, this genre has provided many examples to explore how actual events and people are portrayed. This current examination pays special attention to these film portrayals and focuses on three specific examples, the portrayals of Johnny Cash in *Walk The Line*, Ray Charles in *Ray*, and Bobby Darin in *Beyond The Sea*, in terms of how the portrayals are executed and can be used to evaluate authenticity and mythmaking in film.

The current research and analysis has presented many questions to consider. These queries include, but are not limited to: Is it possible to have an accurate portrayal of a subject on film? How does an audience member reconcile his/her opinion of the life of the subject with the portrayal presented in the film? Moreover, will the film spur the viewer to seek further information or do additional research on his or her own? How do filmmakers assert the authenticity professed in a biographical film? In addition to these questions, there is much more to consider on the grander scope of film, biography, history, authenticity, and myth. “What is lost and what is gained in portraying history through film? How do filmmakers and historians negotiate the tension between accuracy and truth? Does cinema embody the autobiographies of the scriptwriters and filmmakers more than those of the historical characters portrayed?” (Voeltz, 2010) The portrayal of an individual's life on film cannot escape being subjective; the level of this subjective nature can vary greatly, however. Within this subjectivity lie many layers worthy of evaluation. Filmmakers can choose many different aspects of the subject's life to emphasize. What does this emphasis say about the filmmaker's intentions? “And most

crucially, what do audiences actually experience when watching “history on film”...what historical myths and misconceptions does the film convey? In spite of historical inaccuracies, does the film still convey certain truths about the past?” (Voeltz, 2010)

As revealed in the previous sections, there are various challenges that can arise when attempting to satisfy the demands for authenticity while crafting a compelling story. Even with the best of intentions for satisfying all objectives involved, filmmakers are faced with a demanding process. “Digging for the past is easy. Making it mean something is much more difficult. What you come up with are disconnected fragments that do not fit together into a complete and meaningful story.” (Rosenstone R. A., 2006)

Biographical filmmakers are charged with the task of finding a balance between showing a unique, intimate look at the subject, and making sure they capture the most well known stories/parts of the subject’s life. They must simultaneously introduce new information about the subject and reinforce the prior knowledge of the subject in a captivating and entertaining manner. If too much is known about a subject he/she can be dismissed as too familiar to pursue as biopic subject, and if a subject is too obscure, he/she can be rejected as a suitable subject to build a film around due to the financial risk of spotlighting someone who might fall victim to lack of widespread interest, thus leading to lack of revenue.

Why are some biopics favored and superiorly received versus others by audiences? Is it that they include certain elements that help portray the life of the subject in a satisfactory manner for keeping with the preconceived idea of what the audience believes about that person(s)? Or is it that the audience is pleased with the amount of new information provided in said film? One answer could be that these films include

certain elements that are appealing to audiences in that they provide an opportunity for audiences to see a reflection of him/herself in the text, and therefore viewers receive these films more favorably. Another response might be that the viewer is seeking to find something exotic to his/her own being in the life of the subject. These films are capable of providing a peek into the life of an entertainer so legendary the audience desires copious amounts of information on the subject, thus receiving the film approvingly as compared to other films. “The biopic narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world; to illuminate the fine points of a personality; and for both artist and spectator to discover what it would be like to be this person, or to be a certain type of person.” (Bingham, 2010)

In addition to audiences desiring to feel connected to individuals depicted in biographical films, audiences oftentimes have a longing to connect to a bygone era. “If the conditions for nostalgia stem from a dissatisfaction with the uncertainties of the present, and a longing for the perceived certainties of the past, the pop/rock biopic offers an avenue through which to revisit that past.” (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007) The audience is looking to connect with something by viewing these films. The viewer may not consciously know what that something is. The viewer may connect with a specific person or era through the nostalgic qualities that the film is capable of providing. It is common for individuals to have interest in particular biographical subjects because of the memories that these subjects elicit. Reactions from these memories might stem from the viewer wanting to feel as he/she did when he/she was younger and watching the film provides an opportunity to reminisce about a certain

period of his/her life. It could also be the viewer holds a fascination with a particular due to do a family connection or other related interest. Audiences can be obsessed with the concept of celebrity and learning as much as possible about the lives of his/her favorite luminary. “The biopic, that ‘true story’ of a figure we have chosen celebrate and condemn, has played and continues to play a significant part in determining how our culture constructs its notions of fame, and what it takes to be a celebrated figure.”

(Custen, 2000)

“While most biopics do not claim to be the definitive history of an individual or era, they are often the only source of information many people will ever have on a given historical subject.” (Cucca, 2011) Biopics, oftentimes, do provide the only knowledge about a given subject and other times, the films are used as the cornerstone of knowledge of the person’s life, but not necessarily the entire base of knowledge about a given subject. While most would consider biopics endorsed by the subject or subject’s family as the most accurate and authentic version of a life story possible, it is important to consider that these versions can be problematic if the subject or family wants a particular account told or has a financially advantageous agenda. Many times these films act as vehicles to reinvigorate the public’s interest about the life of the subject, and an increase in sales of the subject’s product(s) is a very likely byproduct of these films. It is also possible that the subject’s life may have ended under not so ideal circumstances and the family feels like they need to vindicate the deceased.

Audiences are prone to want to assess the accuracy of the facts that are presented in biographical films. “Filmmakers must try, to the best of their ability, to maneuver through the preconceived ideas about the subject’s life story to make a film that the

audience will consider ‘authentic.’” (Custen, 2000) The current text has endeavored to look at how authenticity can be demonstrated in biographical films. Considerations that affect how authentic a film is considered to be include the actors who are cast, the actors performances, how music is involved in the film, the costumes and locations used, the representation of the given time/era, as well as the depiction of other events that happened around the same time period.

As thoroughly recognized earlier in this text, some degree of authenticity is lost in every retelling or recreation of a story. There is no life story that can receive a positively faultless interpretation in film. The factors that can influence how closely these filmic versions are or are not to how they actually transpired are abundant. Along with the fact that filmmakers take obvious liberties when producing biographical films, an absolute truth in film is impossible due to the simple fact that people remember things differently. Each account, even if retold by the subject in question, can include details omitted, exaggerated, or forgotten. Memory plays an important role in biographical filmmaking. One is prone to hyperbole in remembering accounts of events. Therefore, one cannot truly form a realistic account of a subject’s life. “The status of what passes for ‘history’ is itself unresolved.” (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007) “At best, the popular music biopic can only provide a superficial account of a performer’s career, one which simply scratches the surface of his or her life. To complain because it fails to do any more is to misunderstand the constraints, the objectives, and the experience of cinema.” (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007)

Before the Internet, social media, and entertainment news programs, audiences found out about musical entertainers lives through their songs, biographies, television performances, interviews, newspaper articles, and the occasional gossip columnist. Therefore, the perception of these musicians could be managed or controlled, and audiences were likely to understand this fact. It is now common, with the advent of the digital age, and the paparazzi, for the general public to find out information about the entertainer's life that he/she might have been trying to hide or downplay. Therefore, current audiences are able to judge the portrayal of any modern day entertainer with a different regard because much of what is known about these individuals has been demythologized. Further, most filmmakers choose to focus on a limited period of the subject's life and therefore often receive criticism for not depicting the person as a complete subject; these films, however, can still provide a satisfactory vehicle for an authentic and compelling depiction of a subject and, as stated above, provide a means to activate myths. "Film-makers make a virtue of, and turn to their advantage, the failure to represent the past in its entirety. In the end, they have sought more to construct than to reconstruct a reality." (Custen, 2000)

As mentioned throughout this essay, there are many problems that can arise regarding the production of biopics; these problems can lead to complications that affect whether or not films get made, released, critically acclaimed, positively accepted by audiences, or rejected by historians.

Viewers are also apt to consider what is more important in a film: a comprehensive picture of a life or a portrayal of isolated event(s)/time period that helped shaped the subject. Those making the biopics must consider what to include or omit in

approximately two hours. They must consider what potential audiences already know about the subject and decide whether to include it, and if so, how to present it. There are multiple ways to portray any given subject's life, and two films could be presented extremely differently, choosing to focus on drastically different details or time periods, but still enacting the myths about the subject. "Now, we would think that it is impossible that two accounts which are not the same can be true at the same time, but nevertheless, they seem to be accepted as true in some cases, the only difference made is that one account is considered better or more accurate than the other. In other cases, the two accounts can be considered equally valid because the differences between them are not perceived as such." (Levi-Strauss, 1979)

Biopics lack the details that make these lives intriguing. Audiences only get a broad-stroke look at a life because of the time constraints and the need to adhere to the themes audiences expect from biopics - the narrative arc that has been discussed throughout the current text. When filmmakers do choose specific stories or instances to highlight in their films, one could argue those should make sure to display accuracy, but that is not always the case as demonstrated earlier in this examination-those stories, too, are susceptible to dramatization.

As mentioned throughout the current text, the power and influence of the entertainment industries is astounding. Individuals leave their opinions on many things in our culture susceptible to what is presented to them by movie studios, record labels, actors, musicians, and a host of other celebrities and mass media. Many ideas are prone to come from "life-as-constructed-by-Hollywood, a world above other imaginary worlds.

This world shaped our conceptions of the self, defined both history and greatness.”

(Custen, 2000)

The biopic with its influential stage and popularity is capable of many objectives. Beyond simply the entertainment value of these films lies the potential to significantly contribute to a celebrity’s legacy, as well to reinvigorate the public about a star’s career.

In viewing several films within the biographical film genre for research pertaining to the current text, I spent much contemplation on the shared themes present in the films. All filmmakers in this genre have similar agendas and objectives. My research led to overwhelming evidence that the themes important to filmmakers include: difficult early life family dynamics, whether with a parent, sibling, or other family member; obstacles in the early stages of the subject’s professional career; success in a given field in spite of said obstacles; strains or cost of romantic relationships/marriages; drug and/or alcohol abuse; and a professional comeback and/or personal redemption. These themes are used to demonstrate myths.

The specific myths assessed in the films examined in this current examination are grounded in the themes that are prevalent in all popular music biopics. The strained or absent father-son relationship theme sets the tone in each film for the struggle each subject endures. The depiction that each subject’s father was occluded from the subject’s life is the foundation for constructing the myth that all of these men were responsible for his own rise from humble beginnings. This myth is continued in scenes where the subject is shown being taken advantage of by those in the music industry and years of struggling “paying dues” to achieve success. As noted earlier many scenes show these men facing resistance in the early stages of his career, but overcoming these challenges. These films

and themes within construct the myths associated with the underdog/anything-is-possible outlook. This is related to myths of the everyday hero, the thought that an everyman can achieve stardom and rise from having nothing to having everything. This is shown as achieved with a whatever-it-takes attitude which can include changing one's name, appearance, music, etc. This rags-to-riches ascent is also in line with the myth of the American Dream, believing that one can accomplish anything regardless of circumstances. These films offer a "commercialized version of the American Dream that ignores the implications of social position in our society, and instead promotes a materialistic mythology in which individual struggle, effort, responsibility, and talent equal success; romantic love replaces a lost sense of brotherhood; and the reasons for failure lie within." (Smith, Jr., 2009)

The cinematic presentation of a subject's life has become exceedingly popular, especially as audiences' levels of concentration have become increasingly fragmented and attention spans shortened leaving many people to opt for films over books. "Movies presented and perceived as pseudo-histories, possess a particular prestige, a visible public presence, and are likely to be consumed by much larger audiences than, for example, a book." (Inglis, *Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic*, 2007) The biographical film is included in a larger, complicated film genre, which is concerned with historical events. "Other than this trait [of treating a true life story] the definition of what constitutes a biopic— and with it, what counts as fame— shifts anew with each generation." (Cucca, 2011) Though it is a genre that has not received much attention from academic scholars, its popularity continues to grow as demonstrated by the increase in the number and variety of films made, reception from film audiences, and recognition

by the industry at its annual awards ceremonies. Biographical films that are concerned with lesser-known subjects are able to operate at an advantage when evaluated for accuracy due to the lack of previous knowledge of the subject. The less that is known about a subject the less scrutinized the film is likely to be; films which much is known about the subject are susceptible to harsher judgment from audiences and critics alike. The potential discrepancies in the production of these films can contribute to how they received by the academic community.

In all popular music biopics myths are activated in some capacity, since these performers have lived a public life and therefore his/her life has been mythologized. What the audience has to base its opinion on, of whether or not the portrayal is accurate and/or authentic, is what has been shown to them through mediated sources, therefore, even what they are perceiving as the way things happened contains myth.

Every human is a biographical subject with his/her own life story, so each actor that is portraying another celebrity in a biographical film is intersecting his/her position as someone with his/her own story to tell with that of the subject he/she is playing.

Myths are capable of also being formed by the music itself. For instance, in the film *Walk The Line*, it shown that many listeners assume Johnny Cash has been to prison because he wrote and convincingly performed the song, "Folsom Prison Blues." It is common when a performer is also responsible for writing his/her own music for the listener to presume that the songs are based on personal experiences of the performer. When these performers perform, or more specifically write, songs that are not genuine to their own life experiences they are constructing myths about their life, and their body of work becomes a vehicle for myths to be activated.

The current text has only served to evaluate a small portion of what could be considered when analyzing the biographical film genre; it is not capable of canvassing all the topics relevant to a comprehensive examination of biographical films. There are many topics that I would suggest if engaged in a more thorough study of the genre.

Further research in the area of popular music biopics could explore the lack of women as subjects in these films and what degree studios exclude women musicians as worthy subjects and/or box office draws. A look at television versus theatrical films is another area I believe to be worthy of its own analysis, including a look at how lower budgets, lesser-known actors, and less marketing and promotion efforts affect how these films and their subject portrayals are viewed. Another topic I would explore more intensely deals with the number of biopics produced in the last few years. Questions concerning this topic include: Is there a tipping point of oversaturation? How long can film studios expect audiences to care about the lives of entertainers? Is the film industry producing films diverse enough for each to be considered relevant? My speculation is biographical films will only gain more popularity, especially those concerned with musicians, as many of the most popular musicians of the past century die.

Other queries worthy of a deeper look include: Does trying to accommodate an entire life story in an approximately two-hour biopic act as a disservice to the subject? When audiences think of biopic subjects do they think of the actor's (list them) instead of the actual subject? This is not an exhaustive list of further topics; it contains only topics that I would explore in a lengthier examination.

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